ALL Western

DEC.—JAN. 25¢

• A DELL MAGAZINE •

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THE ROAD TO SANDOVAL

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

Other Exciting Westerns by

ERNEST HAYCOX,

HARRY S. DRAGO,

Frank Bonham, Bill Gulick,

Eugene Cunningham,

S. Omar Barker

★ ALL WESTERN DEC.—JAN. ★

"I thought you might need this—for luck," said Lass.

Rodeo Killer, Chap. 7

ALL WESTERN

December, 1950-January, 1951

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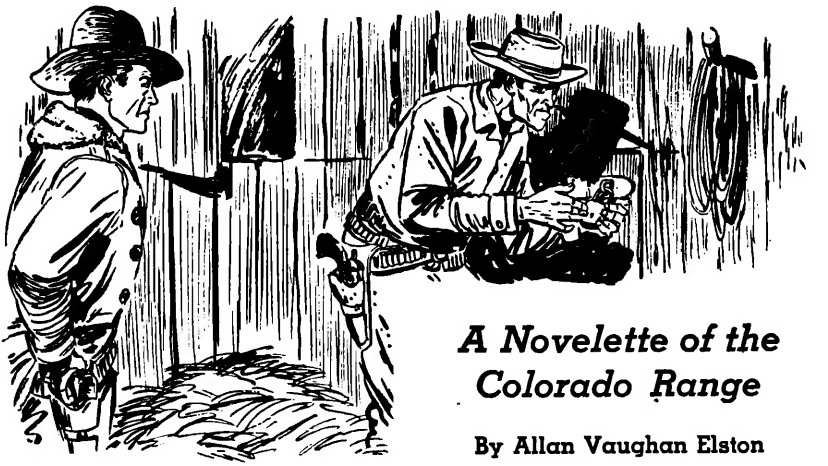
THE ROAD TO SANDOVAL



A Novelette of the Colorado Range

By Allan Vaughan Elston

The predicament of the Half Circle H doesn't seem to be any of Saguache Joe's business—at least, it doesn't until he glimpses Molly Hifeldt. Then Joe sees things in a different light!

CHAPTER ONE

Boxcar Buster

"RIDE 'em, cowboy," mourned Saguache Joe, as the freight jolted around a curve and Joe's sombreroed head was bumped against the boxcar roof. "Who'd have thought I'd ever have fell so low as to ride a side-door Pullman like a common bum?"

As a matter of fact, Joe had a good excuse. He was on his way from Alamosa, Colorado, to a place called Sandoval, New Mexico. An hour before he had been traveling in the proper dignity of his kind, astride a long-gaited roan mare, an A-1 stock saddle between his chaps. Of these cherished possessions he had been robbed. The thing had happened just as he was crossing the tracks at a lonely water tank. A masked man had stepped out from under the tank, presented two silent though convincing arguments, relieved Joe of his horse, his gun, and the roll of bills on his hip. Then the fellow had ridden away into the night, leaving Saguache Joe standing boot-deep in a snowdrift. It was in the dead of a hard winter and there had been long spiky icicles hanging from that water tank.

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The first freight drag coming along and stopping for water happened to be a string of gondolas, mostly loaded with coal. Midway between engine and caboose, however, there chanced to be a single boxcar; into this Joe had found shivering entrance through a high end window. Being a cowboy, he easily discerned the nature of the car's cargo. It was quite dark in the car, but the feel and the smell of the cargo proved it to be cottonseed-oil cake.

"Golly!" exclaimed Saguache Joe between chattering teeth. "I'll bet some cow outfit down the line'll sure be glad when this car o' cake is spotted on their-all's sidin'. This sure is starvation winter for cattle. What with the snow flag-deep to the grama sod, I ain't seen a cow brute in two months what didn't look like a rail fence."

He made himself as comfortable as possible on top of the seed cake, which was sacked in hundred-pound sacks and which filled the car to about two-thirds of its height. Finally he excavated a few sacks and made a cave for his body, which helped to warm him. Then he felt in one of his boots. Sure enough, the sixty-five dollars emergency stake which he had always cached there as a habit was safe. This much had been salvaged from the bandit.

"It'll sure be a unlucky day for that jasper if I ever bump into him again," muttered Saguache Joe, "that is, if I knowed him, which ain't likely, seein' as it was plumb dark and he wore a mask."

With this reflection, Joe curled up in his cave to seek respite in sleep. Being a healthy young man, he attained that end. The freight rumbled on. Sometime during the night it stopped. There was a good bit of backing and bucking, and clanking of coupling pins; but Joe slept so soundly he was not disturbed.

When he awoke a frostbit dawn was peeping through the cracks of the car walls. He heard no rumble of wheels; the car was perfectly still. Joe looked out. There was no other car in sight. Joe's car seemed to be spotted on a siding at a small, crossroads cow town.

Five minutes later the cowboy was making his way up the cinders toward a depot whose legend read: PARKVIEW —COLORADO.

Just why, Joe could not understand, for if there were any park around, he failed to view it. He saw snow-covered and bushless flats in every direction except south. Far away to the south, white against a dun sky, arose a chain of box mesas.

The town itself was drab, unpainted, and oppressively uninviting. No warmth of smoke arose from its chimneys to challenge the chill of the dawn. The place was asleep, with apparently no reason for waking up. Saguache Joe lumbered awkwardly along the cinders, his batwinged chaps flapping and his spurs clinking. He turned the collar of his sheepskin coat up until it touched the bottom of his sombrero brim. The holster at his belt was, of course, empty. Being bereft of both horse and gun made Joe feel as dismal as this dark gray dawn and as forlorn as this decrepit town.

Arriving at the depot, he found it tenantless, although the waiting-room was unlocked. He entered the latter and found it comparatively warm, for the embers of the night's fire still remained in a big barrel stove. A good place to loaf, thought Joe, till the town woke up.

He sat down and counted the sixty-

five dollars that the bandit had overlooked. Anyway, he could get breakfast. After that he planned to invest his capital, if possible, in a second-hand saddle and a cheap horse. Anything would beat riding a freight train, he mused, and moreover this railroad didn't go to Sandoval.

This latter fact was attested to by a system map on the waiting-room wall. Joe examined the map, and after some search he put his finger on a dot marked Parkview.

"Not so bad," muttered the cowboy. "I see I'm not more'n fifteen-twenty mile north of the New Mexico line. And let's see, here's Sandoval, New Mexico. Almost due south of here about a hundred miles."

It was at Sandoval that Joe planned to meet three friends whom he hadn't seen for a long while, cronies by the names of Steve Elkins, Hod Slavins, and Four-finger Fox. Assuming that there was a road across the mesas, Joe figured he could make Sandoval in three days by saddle, in spite of the snow. He saw by the map that there was no practical rail route to Sandoval; such a trip would involve six times the direct distance and three changes. And if he bought a ticket he would have reduced his capital below the price of the cheapest kind of saddle and horse. When he joined up with his pals, Saguache Joe had no mind to be afoot.

A few minutes later a fattish, pleasant-featured man of middle age entered the depot. Joe saw immediately by the legend on his cap that he was the agent.

"Howdy?" greeted the agent. "Waitin' fer a train?"

"Nope," responded Joe grinningly, thankful that his chaps and spurs hardly warranted any assumption that he was a tramp. "Just waitin' for the town to wake up so I can get breakfast. They got a beanery in this metropolis, have they?"

"Well," informed the agent doubtfully, as he opened the stove and began stirring its coals with a poker, "they's a sign a little ways up the street says 'Hotel'. Call it anything you want to. They start throwin' grub at seven a.m., and it lacks just five minutes of that now."

"I'll take a chance," answered Saguache Joe. "And while information's free, have they got a deadfall around here where I could trade somebody out of a cheap second-hand bronc and saddle?"

"Johnson's livery," informed the agent, "three doors beyond the hotel."

"And a hardware store where I might talk 'em out of a shootin' gun?"

"Two doors beyond the livery," explained the railroad man, stoking the stove from the scuttle.

"And is they a road leadin' south out of here toward Nueva Mex?"

"Whereabouts in Nueva Mex?"

"Sandoval."

"Whewee! That's some trip in this snow," exclaimed the agent. "All of a hundred miles. But yes, they's a good road to Sandoval, and a low pass over the mesas. Enough travel on that road to pack down the snow, too. And, come to think of it, plenty of ranches you could stop at."

"What ranches?"

"Eleven mile out you come to the Half Circle H. Four mile more and you hit the Soup Dish. Beyond that I can't call 'em," explained the agent.

"Thanks a heap," said Joe. "So long, *amigo*."

He left the depot and plowed his

way across the street. Guided by the sign referred to by the agent, he made his way to a dilapidated structure, once a saloon but now a hotel and restaurant. He entered to find a row of frowsy tables and a fly-specked, soup-stained lunch counter. Joe seated himself at the latter. A waitress appeared from the rear. She was sleepy-eyed, knock-kneed, and dish-faced, not a day over forty-eight; her darkish hair had been the recent recipient of an unsuccessful application of peroxide.

She retreated after taking Joe's order for ham and eggs.

While she was gone a man descended some steps through a stair well which gave into the restaurant from the second floor. This customer, thought Joe, must have been a tenant for the night, recently arisen, because he was still buttoning his buckskin vest as he came down the steps. By boots, gun, spurs, and hat he was a cowman.

Saguache Joe observed immediately that this fellow had come awake with a dark-brown grouch. He did not greet Joe, as he should have done by all local conventions. He kicked one chair out of his way, snatched another one to a place at a table, slumped in it, and then scowled a black scowl at the world in general. Any scowl he scowled was likely to be black, thought Saguache Joe, for it seemed to Joe that here was the blackest white man he had ever seen. His eyes and his tousled hair were black, jet-black. He had not shaved, if even the day before, and the stubble on his jowl and cheek was as bristly black as the hair on the back of a Poland China barrow.

When the waitress came he snapped an order at her. That the waitress was afraid of him was attested by the manner in which she stood aloof from him, answering frightenedly:

"Comin' up, Mr. Riff."

"Somehow," muttered Saguache Joe to himself, "I don't just exactly cotton to this Mr. Riff. Somebody oughter stand him on his ear in a barrel of rain water and spin him around."

The ham and eggs arrived and employed Joe's interest. Just as he was finishing his breakfast the front door opened. In it stood the amiable little agent from the depot across the street.

"I say, Riff," spoke the agent, "would you mind stoppin' in at the Half Circle H on your way home and leavin' a message?"

"What d'you think I am?" wheezed Riff peevishly. "I ain't no messenger boy for the Half Circle H. I ain't goin' home till late this afternoon, anyway."

Before this discourteous reply had been completed the agent espied Saguache Joe. Joe was strolling up to the cash register to pay his score.

"I say, podner," said the agent, addressing Joe, "I believe you said you was ridin' south. If so, you'll pass the Half Circle H eleven miles out. It's right on the main road. Would you mind leavin' a message?"

"Why," responded Joe with a broad grin, "bein' sort of halfway civilized, I wouldn't mind it a bit."

"Just leave word at the Half Circle H, then," requested the agent, "that a car of cottonseed-oil cake, long overdue on account of misrouting, arrived last night and is spotted on the siding. I see by the B L that it's consigned to the Half Circle H, freight prepaid."

"I'll sure tell 'em," promised Joe, seeing no reason to mention that he himself had arrived in town aboard that same boxcar. "And I reckon they won't be mad, either. What with the

sod all friz up with snow and ice, them Half Circle H cows ought to be right cheerful to have this car o' cake troughed up to 'em."

"Say," wheezed the man Riff from his table, "where did that busted and broke-down Half Circle H outfit get the price of a car o' cake? Sure it's for them?"

The agent turned from Joe, who was paying his score to the waitress, to Riff. Apparently the railroad man stood in no awe of Riff.

"I thought you weren't interested," he retorted. "You turned me down when I asked you a civil favor, so now what you hornin' in for? Yes, the car's for the Half Circle H, prepaid. I reckon Bert Hifeldt ordered it, and paid for it, before he died with your bullet in his stomach, Riff. I forgot about that shooting for a moment, else I wouldn't have insulted the Half Circle H by asking you to take the message."

Turning from the scowling Riff, the agent spoke again to Saguache Joe.

"Tell 'em I understand they're short-handed some," he told Joe, "so I'll protect 'em on demurrage the best I can. Railroad oughtn't to kick if they take two weeks to unload that car, after the way it's been misrouted."

The agent left the restaurant and crunched across the snow of the street to the depot. Joe, turning from the cash register, saw that Riff had arisen and was advancing toward him.

"Who are you, anyway?" snarled Riff.

Joe did not forget that his gun holster was empty; therefore he chose to be diplomatic with Riff.

"I'm the gent," he replied amiably, "who chaperoned this car o' cake into town."

His grin did not wear well on Riff's temper.

"Don't get funny with me, cowboy," retorted Riff. "Who are you, where did you come from, and where are you going?"

There is always a limit, and by Saguache Joe's ethics these insolent questions achieved such limit. Armed or unarmed, Joe felt that he had no choice but to reply:

"My name's Saguache Joe; I come from Alamosa; I'm goin' down the street to the hardware store to buy a gun. After that I'm gonna shoot a hole through the first ugly buzzard who asts me any more fool questions."

Under their bristly stubble Riff's jowls turned from black to purple. He whipped out a Colt .45 and jammed its muzzle into Joe's ribs.

"I'll kill you for that!"

Riff's threat was a shriek, echoed by the shriek of the homely waitress. From the kitchen in the rear a Mexican cook came running.

"You'll murder me, you mean," corrected Saguache Joe, forcing a calm voice although there was a chill creeping up the small of his back. "And that'd be bad judgment, because I see you got two witnesses. They'd testify I haven't a gun on me. Shoot me and hang, Riff."

This cold reminder very likely saved Joe's life. For Riff, after glaring at him a full minute, finally jammed the gun back in its holster.

Joe said, "Wait about five minutes and you can have a even break. Watch me when I come out of the hardware store. I'll be heeled. You can cut loose then and no questions ast."

Without waiting for reply, Saguache Joe turned on his boot heels and left the restaurant. He went five doors down the snow-packed walk to the

hardware store. On the counter of this store the dealer began to show him various guns, new guns priced up to fifty dollars.

"Got anything second-hand?" Joe asked. "I'm some short."

"Here's one," responded the merchant, "and a bargain. The bone is broke off one side of the grip. Cowboy bought it on time, nicked it all up, and then turned it in because he couldn't pay the balance. But the movement's as good as new. She's yours for ten dollars."

Joe tried the action and was pleased. He bought the gun. He also purchased a box of cartridges, put five of them where they would do the most good, and belted the rest. He left the shop, having expended, in all, twelve of his sixty-five dollars.

He stepped out sidewise, facing alertly down the walk toward the restaurant. Riff, however, did not appear. Joe had hardly expected him to, for he had a hunch that Riff was yellow. After waiting what he considered a decent and dignified interval, Joe passed on two doors to the livery stable.

There he was able to trade the proprietor out of a small bay cow pony, eight years old but sound, for the sum of twenty-five dollars, and for a like sum he purchased a much worn and skirt scarred saddle, an old blanket, and a bridle which had a strap for one rein and a tie rope for the other. This gave Saguache Joe a complete road outfit, such as it was, and left him three silver dollars in hard cash.

"Know the layout to the Half Circle H?" he asked the liveryman.

The query appeared to embarrass the liveryman. He displayed a reluctance to gossip about the Half Circle H, as if some phase of the subject cowed him. Finally, however, he gave out a few details.

"It's all shot to pieces," he told the customer. "There was two brothers and one sister. Bert, the steadiest brother, got shot up by Riff of the Soup Dish. Riff was acquitted because Bert Hifeldt had rid up to the Soup Dish and started bawling Riff out about Riff's stealing water from the creek, what belonged by priority to the Half Circle H. You can't convict a man when the victim is armed and jumps the other man at his own house. That left Oscar Hifeldt and Molly Hifeldt. Oscar ain't got the head Bert had, and they say the outfit's shot to pieces. Cattle starvin' and hands quittin' and such like. But understand, pardner, I'm neutral. I wouldn't start no talk against Bill Riff. Riff's a—"

Joe turned away contemptuously, waiting to hear no more. It was no business of Joe's, anyway, so he mounted his bay cow pony and left the livery. But as he rode out of town, he reflected that the car of seed cake should turn the Half Circle H's luck. After this hard winter, cattle that survived should bring a neat price in the spring. And here was a car of cake to insure the survival of the herd.

CHAPTER TWO

Saguache Joe, Miracle

JOE followed the road that turned south from town, a trail which, by the agent's information, was the road to Sandoval. The snow was packed hard in the middle of the road, although on either side it was eight to ten inches deep, with an occa-

sional drift. Joe hadn't ridden three miles before he saw a dead cow.

Yes, mused Saguache Joe, lucky was the ranch that had a car of cake. It was certainly one hard winter on cowstuff.

Another mile, and Joe saw another bovine carcass. After a while he began to see living cattle, backs humped, heads drooped, standing forlornly here and there in the snow. It seemed to Joe that he could count every rib. Pretty soon he came close enough to a cow to read its brand, Half Circle H. Joe hastened his pace. He was a true cowboy, and hence it hurt him to see these animals starving while on the siding at Parkview was a car of cake designed for their comfort.

Another mile, and he became conscious of something peculiar in his pony's gait. He dismounted and discovered that the horse had cast a shoe. Another shoe was loose, he saw. A cheap job of shoeing on a cheap horse. Joe wished he had his own big-boned strawberry-roan mare, the one he had lost to the bandit at the water tank. The thing to do, he decided, was to stop at the Half Circle H long enough to borrow some pincers and remove all the shoes from this pony. It was certain that they were not needed in the snow.

Remounting, he rode on. On this slick track, five miles an hour was his best pace. He had left town at about eight, so it was somewhere around ten when he first sighted the Half Circle H buildings.

He called it a neat layout. The fences looked pretty good. There was a cottonwood creek paralleling the road, and in the valley of this creek Joe could see the ditch-bound contour of a hay *vega*. But he saw no stacks. There was nothing on the meadow except a white blanket of snow—barring an occasional lump of red and white, a dead cow.

"Gee!" muttered Joe. "This outfit'll think I'm Santa Claus, when I bring the news about this car o' cake."

He came to a gate on whose post were marked the characters—Half Circle H. Immediately inside the gate was a group of buildings. Joe entered the gate and passed up a lane between two rows of shacks—barn, crib, shed, and feed lot to the left; and bunkshack, cookshack, blacksmith shop, and chicken house to the right. Heading the street was an adobe ranch residence, a solid structure of one floor. The environs seemed deserted, except for one gaunt yellow mule whose head and neck protruded over the lower half door of the barn.

Saguache Joe went to the main house.

At first there was no response to his knockings. Finally there appeared a young woman of perhaps twenty-five years. Joe did not miss the fact that she opened the door only a little way until she had carefully appraised him. He grinned his usual amiable grin, whereupon she opened the door wide.

"How do you do?" she greeted.

"Howdy," responded Joe. "This is the Half Circle H, ain't it?"

"What's left of it," assented the young woman, looking past Joe down the deserted lane. It seemed to Joe that her shoulders shrugged and that she bit her lips.

"I just brought a message from the agent at Parkview," Joe said.

By now two things had struck him with something of a shock. In the first place, although the girl was of a plump, almost athletic build and was

dressed in the corduroy suiting of a man, he saw by her eyes that he had interrupted a session of very feminine weeping. In the second place he saw that she was extremely pretty; at least, she was pretty by Saguache Joe's standards, for Joe belonged to that school of connoisseurs who prefer women to be plump rather than willowy; altogether this young woman was of a type which suited Joe exactly. Joe didn't know it then, but Molly Hifeldt came of good Holland stock. There was a homely Dutch charm about her. Her hair was rich brown. Knotted high on her head, it contradicted the impression, imposed by her clothes, of a rough-riding ranch girl.

"I just want to leave word," informed Joe, "that there's a car of cake, prepaid and billed to you, spotted on the siding at Parkview."

"Oh, has it come at last?"

The words carried a mixture of joy and despair. Joe understood her to mean that the cake had come too late to do the cattle any good. He said quickly:

"Yes, ma'am, and you ought to have it hauled out right sudden. Agent said he'd protect you on demurrage, but I seen some of your cowstuff as I come along. Better start throwing that cake in the feed troughs, pound a day to the cow at first, then increase to two pounds. How many cows you got and do they know how to eat cake?"

"About six hundred," was the rather dispirited answer. "And yes, my brothers fed cake last winter. I'll–I'll–we'll get the cake out right away. Thank you very much. What did you say your name was?"

"Folks call me Saguache Joe."

"I'm Molly Hifeldt," said the girl. "Are you staying in this neighborhood?"

"No, I'm headed for Sandoval, New Mex. This road goes to Sandoval, doesn't it?"

"I've heard so. I've never been that far south."

"Thanks. By the way, ma'am, care if I borrow your blacksmith shop a minute? I want to unshoe my bronc before riding on."

"Help yourself," offered Miss Hifeldt. "I'll–I'll–I guess I'll be tending to that seed cake."

Joe left her and led his pony down to the shack which served as a smithy. The place was spare of tools, and it took Joe some minutes to find a pair of pincers. Ten minutes later he had removed the three remaining shoes from his horse.

He was on the point of mounting to ride away when he observed a sight that definitely arrested him. He saw Molly Hifeldt, now wearing a sheepskin coat over her corduroys, emerge from the barn, leading the gaunt yellow mule. There was a harness on the mule's back. The girl led the mule to the shafts of an old buggy and began securing the traces to a singletree.

"Are you all alone, ma'am?" asked Joe as he left his pony and trudged across the ranch street to the barn.

"Yes, I'm all alone," answered Molly Hifeldt, stooping in the snow to rebuckle one of her overshoes. When she arose again Joe saw that she was biting her lips. He knew now that there was something peculiarly tragic about the situation and he meant to find out about it. He asked for details.

"My brother Oscar," the girl finally informed him, "went north to Alamosa to borrow some money from a bank there. Oscar's been gone a week and I'm worried."

It was plain that the girl was making a brave attempt to fight back a flood of tears. Joe became seized with a great urge to help her.

"But what about the cowhands on this layout?" he inquired.

"One by one, in the last few weeks, they've quit," he was informed. "We had a Mexican and his wife who did the housework, but yesterday they quit, too. Since Bill Riff shot my brother Bert things have all gone wrong. Riff stole all our ditch water last summer and we didn't raise any hay. The cattle are too thin to sell. Which means they're also too thin to be stolen—they couldn't stand a drive out of the country."

Saguache Joe was amazed. "And where were you going with this mule and buggy?" he wanted to know.

"To town," replied Molly Hifeldt with an air of utter hopelessness, "to get some of that oil cake."

"But you couldn't haul over two sacks in that buggy eleven miles on this snow," objected Joe. "But maybe you plan to hire some men in town. Tomorrow they can hitch up your farm wagons and get the cake out in quantity."

Joe had already noticed two standard farm wagons parked over by the feed lot, hub-deep in a drift.

"No," replied the girl, avoiding Joe's eyes and digging one of the toes of her overshoes into the snow. "We—that is, I—have no money. I couldn't hire anyone. And if I did, I have no horses."

"No horses!" echoed Joe. "How do you run a six-hundred-cow layout without horses?"

"We don't. We had four good hay teams and some saddle stock. Last time I went to town, someone drove every horse off this place. I suspect the Soup Dish outfit, but can prove nothing."

It was easy to see that nothing but the native Dutch restraint of Molly Hifeldt was keeping her from collapse. As for Saguache Joe, his blood was up. Until he had seen the girl through her troubles he knew that he would travel no farther along the road to Sandoval.

He talked to her awhile and probed from her still further information. Finally he suggested:

"What about hiring me? And three pals of mine by the names of Elkins, Slavins, and Fox?"

"I couldn't pay you," replied Molly, shrugging her shoulders.

"Sure you could," insisted Joe. "We'll haul the cake and save the cows. Soon as your brother Oscar gets back we'll blow. He'll probably bring back the money he went off to borrow, and can pay us off."

"But Oscar might not—well, he might not come home very soon," the young woman objected. "Oscar isn't like Bert was. I can't depend on Oscar like I could Bert. He—he—"

"Never mind," Joe hastened to say. "Anyway, the cake'll pull the cows through this snow, and in the spring they'll bring good money. You can sell a few and pay us off. Me and my pals'll stick till Oscar gets back, win or lose."

Joe would hear of no other solution and under his confident assurance the girl brightened somewhat. She was easily convinced that any program of trying to haul out cake in a one-mule buggy was a joke. Such a method would require, Joe estimated, all the rest of the winter and the next summer. The railroad would hardly allow the car to be spotted over a week. And the cattle would starve to death if they weren't put on a stiff cake ration immediately.

"And maybe we can find out who ran off your horse stock," suggested Joe. "I met Riff in town. What kind of an outfit has he got?"

"A no-good outfit," informed Molly Hifeldt. "They were always causing trouble to my brothers. Riff's ranch is the Soup Dish and the foreman, Mike Lambert, is as tough as Riff."

For a minute Joe pondered the issue. Finally he said:

"I tell you; inasmuch as you're all hitched up and I want to send a telegram anyway, you might as well go to town. File this wire."

The cowboy fished paper and pencil from his coat and wrote:

Steve Elkins,
Sandoval, New Mexico:

Bring Slavins and Fox and come quick to the Half Circle H, eleven miles south of Parkview, Colorado. Get two heavy hay teams and drive them ahead of you. Just before you get here, make a wide detour around the Soup Dish. If you see the Soup Dish outfit, see it first. —SAGUACHE JOE

"And here's three dollars," Joe said to Molly Hifeldt. "Spend one for the telegram and one for a case of pork and beans. Have the depot agent help you load two sacks of oil cake in the buggy. Don't try to haul more through the snow. While you're gone, I'll round up about a hundred head of the thinnest cows I can find, lining 'em up at the troughs in the feed lot. *Tambien,* I'll try to figure out a way to haul out two-three ton of cake tomorrow."

The cowboy's sympathy touched the girl deeply.

"You are awfully good," she said.

Joe bustled her into the buggy, tucking a blanket around her. Then he thought of something else.

"By the way," he mentioned, "I heard Riff say he was riding home this afternoon. He uses this same road, doesn't he? In that case you'll meet him on the way. Any danger of him molesting you?"

"None whatever," assured Molly Hifeldt. "I have a gun in my pocket. If Bill Riff tried to stop me on the road, I'd shoot him."

"That's the talk," agreed Joe heartily. "And now, get going."

The girl gathered the reins in her gloved hands and smiled down upon Joe from the buggy seat.

"I don't know what to say, Mr. Saguache Joe," she said, her voice breaking. "Your coming just now is a miracle. I— I—"

"Let it go at that," interrupted the cowboy. "I haven't done a thing yet. I talk about gettin' two-three ton of that cake out here right away. But I don't know how. I'm bluffing. I'm singing to keep cheerful. My pals can't get here for three-four days. I'm broke, same as you are. With no money, no horses, and no men, how we gonna get that car o' cake eleven miles across the snow? Yet them cows'll die fifty a day if they ain't fed. That cake's just got to move to the Half Circle H. It's just got to."

CHAPTER THREE

Buckaroo's Bluff

SAGUACHE JOE repeated that last desperate resolve to himself over and over again as she drove away. He stood there in the snow by the barn, watching the buggy drawn by the mule recede down the road at an awkward and reluctant pace.

Then he set to work. It did not take Joe long to corral a hundred head of thin cows. In fact, many of the older animals, those in greatest distress, were grouped just west of the feed lot, heads forlornly turned toward the empty troughs therein. The cowboy easily understood this. As the grass was covered with snow and ice, and as the cows had been cake-fed in that same feed lot the preceding winter, the hungry animals now naturally looked toward the same relief.

It was not hard for Joe to understand why the thieves who had stolen the Half Circle H horses had not also raided the cattle. On snow, horses winter better than cattle. They are more competent at pawing up feed. Also, horses are not sold by weight. Thus the horses may have been in shape for a drive out of the country, whereas the cattle certainly were not. And, Joe realized, even if the emaciated cattle had withstood the ordeal of a fast and forced rustlers' drive, they would have been unsalable in any market.

Nevertheless, they represented a real value. Joe saw that about fifty per cent of the cows were "springers," that is, they were heavy with calf. Oil cake could save not only the cows. At the same time Joe figured that it would take twelve hundred pounds of cake a day to salvage the herd, whereas the yellow mule could not transport more than two sacks a day.

By three o'clock Joe had herded a hundred head of the thinnest cows into the lot. He planned to feed them two pounds of cake each, that night, from the slim cargo brought out by Molly Hifeldt. Fortunately there was a tank in the lot, into which water was piped from a small spring.

This work done, Joe stalled his bay cow pony in the barn. In the loft he found no decent hay, although the loft floor was covered about six inches deep with old chaff and stalks.

"If this don't give that bronc the heaves, nothin' will," Joe muttered, as he sorted out the cleanest pickings he could find for his pony. The stuff was so fine that he had to handle it with a scoop instead of a fork.

Next he sat down to figure out a program.

"First time I ever knew that eleven miles was such a daggone long ways," he mused. "There's them twenty-five ton of cake, bought and paid for, and here's them six hundred head of cows, starvin' to death. Wrap them cows around that cake, and spring'll find this ranch with six hundred live cows and three hundred sucking calves. But it's got to be done quick, and no foolin'."

So much was plain. Joe, in his round-up of the hundred thin cows, had found a number of animals too weak to rise. He had also encountered five cases of abortion—tragedies due to pure poverty of flesh.

His mind fixed on Riff; he felt a craving for a showdown with Riff. Riff it was who had taken the Hifeldts' irrigation water last summer, thus leaving the Half Circle H without winter hay. It was Riff who had shot Bert Hifeldt, when Bert had ridden up to protest about the ditch water. Riff was responsible, so by Saguache Joe's logic it was Riff who should pay the score.

Riff would be riding home pretty soon, on the way from town to the Soup Dish. Which reminded Joe that Riff, on arriving home, might possibly start trouble. Riff wasn't likely to forget his run-in with Joe at Parkview. Learning that Joe was working on the

Hifeldt ranch, Riff and his tough foreman, Mike Lambert, might conceivably start a war before Joe was ready for it.

He did not want a war until his three pals arrived from Sandoval. Singlehanded, he could hardly conduct a war with the Soup Dish and at the same time transport a carload of cake from town to the Half Circle H.

Suddenly a bold thought pierced the cowboy's mind. It was born of the fact that no one on the Soup Dish knew him. Riff knew him, but Riff wasn't home yet. Very well, he wouldn't let Riff get home. He could kidnap Riff and– Ah! That was it. A flash of inspiration revealed to Joe a scheme which might save the entire situation.

Twenty minutes later he was squatting, afoot, ambushed behind a blind of snow and tumbleweeds, just without the Half Circle H gate and at the side of the main road. It was the same road that Joe had traveled that morning and on which he had planned to keep on traveling–the road to Sandoval. Now he observed a man mounted on a big iron-gray horse approach from the direction of Parkview. Joe recognized Riff.

When the rider was opposite the blind, Joe stepped out and leveled his gun–the same second-hand gun he had bought for ten dollars at the hardware store–at the man's head. A step more and he had caught Riff's bridle rein with his left hand.

"You're helt up, Mr. Riff," greeted Saguache Joe. "Remember me? I'm the gent had breakfast with you this mornin'. But right now you're helt up. If you don't want to hear this gun go off, stick your fingers in your ears."

Riff, amazed, uttered a crisp oath. However, he elevated his hands earhigh. Joe seized Riff's gun. Then he jerked Riff unceremoniously from saddle to snow.

"Blast your hide!" yelped Riff. His rage fairly choked him and denied him further speech.

Saguache Joe booted the man to his feet. Then, leading the iron-gray horse, he prodded the prisoner in front of him through the gate, up the ranch street to the main house.

Finally Riff found his tongue and broke into a tirade of abuse.

"Blast your hide!" he bawled. "First time I get holt of a gun, I'll–"

"But you aren't like to get holt of a gun today, or even tomorrow," suggested Saguache Joe. "All you'll get holt of is a pencil to write a letter to Mike Lambert with. I'll take the letter to Mike myself."

"You gonna take a letter to Lambert?" yelped Riff. "Why, blast you, Mike'd ride you off the Soup Dish on a .45 slug."

"Oh, I don't think so," disagreed Joe.

He was forced to give Riff a volley of sharp kicks to get him to the house. This house was, of course, deserted, as Molly Hifeldt had gone to town. Once inside, Joe prodded Riff to an unused room, a room which, by its accouterments, seemed to have been occupied formerly by one of the Hifeldt brothers. In this room Joe neatly tripped Riff so that he sprawled on the floor.

Joe found a short tie rope hanging from a hook on the wall, and with this he firmly secured Riff's ankles so that he could not walk. Then he helped the man to a chair at a table. He next produced a sheet of blank paper, an envelope, and a pencil. These he placed in front of Riff.

"Write Mike Lambert a letter," Joe commanded. "I'll say what to write."

"I will like hell!" snarled Riff.

"You'll be there," countered Joe grimly, "if you don't."

He cocked the hammer of his gun, pointing the weapon steadily at Riff's chest. Then with his left hand he laid his watch on the table.

"I'll give you till the second hand gets around to sixty," announced Joe. "If you haven't picked up that pencil by then, I start shooting."

"You're bluffing," said Riff, trying to sneer; but there was a stream of sweat trickling from his forehead down into the black stubble of his beard.

"Call it, then," suggested Joe.

Swiftly with his thumb he uncocked and recocked the gun's hammer. The threat was too much for Riff, who snatched the pencil in a frenzy of fear just as the second hand of the watch reached fifty-five.

"Write," Joe ordered.

In the end, Riff wrote. Joe instructed him, phrase by phrase, the text of his letter. The finished missive read:

Lambert:

I have to go up the line three or four days on a steer deal. But I saw the Hifeldt woman in town and made a sweet contract with her. She was broke, and had a car of oil cake on the siding. Had no money and no credit to hire it hauled out. I agreed to haul it to her crib, and feed it to her cows, for one third the cows I could save. The bearer, Luke Ganzel, will do the feeding; you and the rest of the outfit do the hauling. Hitch up our two best teams and get that cake moving. You get the point, don't you, Mike? You savvy why them cows wasn't driv off when the broncs was. Well, by the time we get a third of the cows for our work, the other two thirds will be strong enough to stand a long drive. Get busy. —BILL RIFF

All during the writing of this letter Joe kept Riff in constant fear of sudden death. Finally the thing was done. Riff was even forced to address and seal the envelope. Then Joe immediately rendered his prisoner entirely helpless.

He tripped Riff, rolled him to his stomach. Then he secured Riff's hands behind him and trussed these bound hands to his bound ankles. This done, Saguache Joe left the room, locked it behind him, and went out to the barn.

Standing outside in the snow was Riff's iron-gray gelding. What to do with it was Joe's next problem. Discretion dictated that he shoot the beast and hide the carcass in a drift. Yet Joe could not bear to do that. Neither dared he turn the animal loose, for fear it would go home and give the show away.

Finally he put the gray in a lean-to annex at the rear of the barn. In this lean-to there was a box stall. Here Joe left the gray, electing to consult with Molly Hifeldt when she came home as to its disposal.

Then he mounted his own bay pony and started up the main road toward the Soup Dish. He recalled his information that the Soup Dish was only four miles farther south.

He wondered whether Mike Lambert would recognize this bay cow pony as a local livery horse. Likely not, he considered, for the bay was inconspicuous, with no outstanding points. As a horse, it was in no way to be compared with Joe's own big-boned roan mare, Strawberry, the mount he had lost last night to the holdup man at the water tank.

As he rode along he framed a story to tell Lambert.

Soon he arrived at the Soup Dish, observing that it was a prosperous lay-

out, its meadows dotted with stacks and its cattle in fair midwinter condition. He saw a man lounging in front of the bunkshack, a two-gunned fellow with a long, horsey face and a bulldog jaw. Joe rode up confidently and accosted him.

"Yes, I'm Mike Lambert," the man admitted, in answer to Joe's question.

Joe smirked, looked over his shoulder, then shot a surreptitious glance into the bunkshack. After which he spoke crookedly through the corner of his mouth.

"All right, Lambert; call me Luke Ganzel. I got two-three other names, but that'n'll do. Riff's got me planted on the Half Circle H. You're not supposed to know me. Savvy?"

Lambert gaped suspiciously. "What's all this song and dance? I don't make you, fellah."

But Lambert advanced a step or two and took a letter which the alleged Ganzel was holding out.

"Bill's got some lay framed—I don't know just what it is," explained Joe. "The Hifeldt woman don't know me and Bill is old pals; she thinks he just picked me up in town today. She made some deal with Riff, but she wouldn't stand for a regular Soup Dish man holdin' down her bunkshack. So I work that end. All you do is haul the cake."

"I don't make you," repeated Lambert, gaping.

"Well, dammit, read the letter and get wise," snapped Joe; he sat there in his saddle and rolled a cigarette, as if he were entirely unconcerned whether Lambert "made" him or not.

Looking up, he saw that the Soup Dish foreman was reading the letter. Without waiting for him to finish it, Joe said:

"Well, I'll be going, Lambert. It's just as well you and me ain't seen together. Bill said when you and your teams showed up tomorrow to act like I was a teetotal stranger."

With that, Joe wheeled his horse and trotted off through the snow. It took all his nerve to ride away from Lambert, for he half expected to get a bullet in his back. That random phrase he had dictated about "you know why them cows wasn't driv off along with the broncs" might or might not be disastrous. If the Soup Dish were guilty, well enough. But if they were innocent of driving off the horses, the clause would stamp Riff's letter as a fake.

Yet Joe turned his back on Lambert and rode off while Mike was reading that very clause. Fifty yards away Joe turned and looked back. He saw that Mike's eyes were on the letter and that a crooked grin was ripening on his long, horsey face. Joe spurred his bay and trotted on exultingly. His bluff had won.

Lambert was taking the bait, which was equivalent to a confession that he had helped Riff drive off the Half Circle H horse stock.

Chapter Four

Cake and Pork and Beans

JOE'S arrival at the Hifeldt ranch was coincident with that of Molly Hifeldt. It was just dusk. In her buggy the ranch girl had a cargo consisting of two sacks of oil cake and one case of pork and beans.

As Joe lifted the latter out into the snow, Molly smiled apologetically.

"Yes," she admitted, "I spent your three dollars. But when Oscar comes

home we'll pay you back. The truth is that the house larder is almost as low as the feed crib."

"Did you send the telegram?"

"Yes."

"Fine," exulted Saguache Joe. "That means reinforcements in three-four days. And them pals of mine are a right handy set of saddle squeezers—and trigger squeezers, too. No, don't go up to the house yet, Miss Hifeldt. Something I got to tell you first."

Quite mystified, Molly Hifeldt waited while Joe unloaded the two sacks of cake. She watched him carry them one by one to the feed lot, saw him dump their contents into the long feed troughs, saw a hundred lean cows close in on the troughs like a pack of jackals around the carcass of a lamb.

"There's them many cows, anyway," Joe called to her, "which won't keel over in the next forty-eight hours. But that's only a sample. Tomorrow we haul out three-four tons and give the whole herd a treat."

"What?" cried Molly Hifeldt. "How?"

Joe picked up the case of pork and beans and started toward the house. The woman followed. Inside the house, he escorted her to that room which served as the cell of Bill Riff.

Riff met their intrusion with a profane volley of threats. For this Saguache Joe rewarded him with a kick on the shins.

"One more crack like that and I gag you, Riff," announced Joe. "You're lucky to be alive; so shut up."

Then he explained to the amazed Miss Hifeldt the wherefore of Riff's confinement. With the girl, fear followed swiftly on the heels of surprise.

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that," she cried. "You can't keep him here forever; and when he gets free, he and Mike Lambert will kill you."

"When my friends from Sandoval get here," countered Joe, "this Soup Dish outfit will be as tame as a bunch of yearling ewes. In the meantime, just to keep 'em out of devilment, we'll let 'em haul out our cake. Now leave this fellow to me, ma'am. I'll hand-feed him in here and sleep in the same room with him. He'll be as safe as a double-cinched saddle on a hobbled horse."

"Speaking of horses, where did you put his?" asked the ranch girl, quite practically.

"That's a point, all right," admitted Joe. "By rights, I'd oughter have took Riff's gray to a deep snowdrift and shot it. But I never could bear to shoot no sound horse. So I put this'n in that box stall in the back of the barn."

"What if those Soup Dish men see the gray when they're unloading cake tomorrow?" worried Molly.

"They'll unload at the crib," reminded the cowboy, "havin' no call to go to the barn. But if you say so I'll go shoot and bury the horse."

"I can't bear to let you do that," objected the girl. "There's a padlock over there on Oscar's bureau. Lock the box stall up with that padlock and put the key in your pocket."

"I'll do that right now," promised Joe.

"While I get supper," amended Molly Hifeldt, and retreated to the kitchen.

Joe took the padlock which lay amid an array of masculine effects on Oscar's bureau, and went to the barn. Before locking up Riff's horse he decided to feed it. For this purpose he used two scoopfuls of the dusty chaff from the loft.

"Eat it and heave, daggone you," muttered Joe as he put out the chaff.

"But maybe you won't heave. Some do and some don't. I see that yellow mule ain't heavin'; and he must have been livin' on this trash since the hay give out."

The heaves, be it understood, is an equine ailment produced by dusty feed. It becomes a chronic cough, almost incurable. One may cure an affected horse by changing it to dustless feed, but thereafter throughout all the animal's life it will need hardly more than a smell of dust to start it heaving violently.

Feeding done, Joe snapped the padlock on the door of the box stall and put the key in his pocket. He then went out into the dusty feed lot and watched the thin cows feast on oil cake. The two hundred pounds of cake were nearly gone and the animals were licking the boards of the troughs. Joe observed that many other cows had trailed in from the range of their own volition, and were bellowing jealously over the rear fence of the lot.

Cows, once fed on cake, become feedwise. Far out on the range other Half Circle H cows had seen a procession of their kind moving toward the corrals and had understood the reason why. Along they came too, mooing in distress. Cattle a mile away saw the homeward movement of cattle a half mile away. And thus had ensued an automatic and horseless roundup. Joe knew that by morning practically the entire herd would be banked against the lot fence.

"It'll sure save a lot of ridin'," Joe assured himself, "and simplify the whole job."

He went to the house and found that Molly Hifeldt had shed her man's clothing and donned the skirts of her sex. Moreover, she had supper ready. Joe closed the door of Oscar's room against the baleful groanings of Bill Riff, then seated himself at a table opposite the comely hostess of his adventure. She proved to be an estimable cook.

That night, to guard better against Riff's escape, Joe slept in the same room with him. During the night he had to get up several times and quiet Riff. Riff at times waxed violent. He writhed mightily in his bonds. Terrible was the vengeance which he swore to inflict on Saguache Joe and the Half Circle H.

Early in the morning Joe fed Riff the contents of a can of pork and beans with a spoon. Riff, in his impotent rage, almost bit through the metal of the spoon. After that, the prisoner was gagged and the door of his room locked. The shades of his window were pulled down.

And for good reason. About eight o'clock, two four-horse teams were seen coming up the main road from the south. There was an extra man on each wagon seat. Thus the caravan included eight draft horses, two farm wagons and four men. On one of the seats Joe recognized Mike Lambert. Clearly here was the Soup Dish outfit obeying the written instruction of their chief.

To confirm this instruction, Mike Lambert stopped at the gate and came up to see Molly Hifeldt. The girl went out to meet him. Having been coached by Joe, she responded unblinkingly:

"Yes, we have made arrangements with Mr. Riff for the Soup Dish to haul our cake."

Which was the pure truth; although of course Lambert could not guess the nature of the arrangements. Saguache Joe took occasion to stand behind Molly while she addressed Lambert. Over

her shoulder he winked wickedly at Mike. Mike caught the wink, and his own lips expanded in a crooked grin.

Soon the hauling caravan had moved on toward Parkview.

"We got 'em goin'," chuckled Saguache Joe. "It's like takin' candy from babies, only easier."

"But oh!" worried Molly. "I'm so afraid they'll find Riff, or his gray horse in that box stall."

"In unloading that cake at the crib," Joe assured her, "they'll have no call to go near either the house or the barn. Besides, I'll be watching."

"But you're only one man, and they're four."

"We'll be four, too," Joe reminded, "when my *compañeros* get here from Sandoval. And when your brother Oscar comes home he'll make five. That ought to handle 'em."

CHAPTER FIVE

No-Good Gun

AFFAIRS moved smoothly that day. Saguache Joe and Molly Hifeldt became fast friends. The more Joe saw of the young woman, the more he liked her. He began scheming to get a steady job on the Half Circle H.

Riff gave no potent trouble. He was regagged in the afternoon, when the two Soup Dish wagons hove in sight coming from the direction of Parkview. The wagons drew up, each loaded with thirty sacks of cake. But for the snow they could have hauled fifty sacks each; yet as it was three tons in all were delivered and stored in the crib.

Joe had good opportunity to size up Lambert's three companions. One was a heavy-set, red-bearded cowhand whom the others called Stumpy. Another was a lengthy beanpole in corduroys who was generally addressed as Tucker. The fourth answered to the name of Pete.

While they unloaded at the crib, Joe had a good excuse to keep out of their way. He lugged eight cake sacks to the feed lot and filled the troughs. He was afraid to let many of the hungry cattle in, for fear they would trample the weaklings. They were bawling jealously outside the lot. So he found a place near by on the range where the winds had swept the ground bare of snow. On this bare ground he spread the contents of eight more sacks. The cattle closed in on the feed and the Half Circle H herd was saved.

Just before the Soup Dish teams left Lambert sought out Joe.

"Ganzel," he asked, "did Riff go away on the train, or horseback?"

"Why," replied Joe without thinking, "I reckon he went up the line by train, Lambert."

"That's funny," growled the Soup Dish foreman. "His gray bronc ain't in the livery. If he went by train, where did he leave his bronc?"

"How do I know?" snapped Joe, assuming a peevishness to cover the confusion he felt because of his stupid break. To change the subject he asked quickly, "Gonna haul out a couple o' more loads tomorrow, Lambert?"

"Reckon so," answered Lambert moodily.

Joe became somewhat nervous as Lambert walked over to his three helpers and engaged them in close converse. Finally the heavy-set man, Stumpy, left the group and strolled over to Joe. His eyes seemed to be

fixed on Joe's gun, which fact more than ever worried Joe.

"Ganzel," said Stumpy, "where did you get that gun?"

Joe knew that his best cue was to be as hard-boiled as anyone else. He jerked the gun out and pointed it at the questioner.

"What the hell business is that of yourn?" he yelped.

To his immense relief Stumpy merely laughed.

"Aw, don't get sore," said Stumpy. "I just noticed the bone was split off one side of the butt. Kinda looks like a gun I bought last month on time, at the Parkview hardware store and then turned back in after makin' one payment."

"Well, what of it?" asked Joe. "Maybe it is. I bought a second-hand gun there yesterday myself."

"Well, if it's the same gun, it's no good," informed Stumpy. "The firin' pin's broke and it won't go off. I just thought I'd tell you, bein' as you're one of us."

Joe turned the muzzle of the gun upward toward the sky and pulled the trigger. There was only a click.

"Well, nail my hide to a snubbin'-post!" exclaimed Joe, grinning sheepishly at Stumpy. "That's one on me. Totin' a no-good gun! And I might have had to use it any time, too."

Stumpy, laughing raucously, rejoined his friends. Naturally he was quite unaware of the double meaning in Joe's last remark. The Lambert crowd drove off to the Soup Dish for the night. Joe immediately discarded the worthless gun and secured the weapon he had taken from Riff. In case the enemy might later recognize some mark on its butt, he belted it under his sheepskin coat.

The next day went as smoothly as the first. Sixty more sacks of cake were delivered by the Soup Dish. While the wagons were in town, Joe made various rides around the Half Circle H range, with a sack of cake on his saddle. Every time he found a cow down, too weak to be driven, he deposited five pounds of cake by the weakling's head and rode on. By night he had thus salvaged many otherwise doomed cows.

When the wagons were unloaded that second evening, Lambert and his men drove home without parley. Saguache Joe occupied himself between then and supper by performing the barn chores.

The pickings of chaff from the loft floor were getting slim. There were three equines to be fed—one yellow mule, one bay cow pony, and the gray gelding of Bill Riff which was in the padlocked box stall. The cottonseed cake was, of course, unsuitable for horse feed. So Joe was forced to ladle out the dusty chaff. At each feeding he expected to hear one or more of the three equines heaving, coughing, sneezing, but in some manner they seemed to manage the feed.

"Well, some do and some don't," mused Joe, as he went to his own supper.

Sitting opposite Molly Hifeldt at mealtimes was becoming more and more of a thrillful experience to the cowboy. At the outset he had offered to rustle for himself at the cookshack, but the girl refused to be left alone, for long, in the house with Riff. There was always a chance that Riff might burst his bonds and escape.

Just after dark it began to snow again. Molly and Joe sat up till ten o'clock, discussing this unfavorable

omen. Joe insisted that the cattle were safe, even if they should get another foot of snow. What worried him most was horse fodder.

"True, we've got three horses," he admitted, "but we sure need a couple o' sacks of oats and five-six bales of bright hay."

"We must find some way to get them," agreed Molly.

Saguache Joe felt a delicious warmth at her use of the pronoun "we." It was an experience he wanted to make permanent. Mighty nice, he thought, to be sitting here snugly in this ranch house, and to hear Molly say "we must do this" and "we must do that." To the cowboy, Saguache Joe, it was all exquisitely chummy. And so they sat there till ten o'clock, while the snow flew without, while from the feed lot came the hummings of a contented herd, while from beyond all the night came the choppy whine of coyotes.

Chapter Six

On the Bad Luck Trail

THE very next morning luck turned viciously against Joe and the Half Circle H. Joe went out at daylight to investigate the fall of snow. He found a clear sky and only about two inches of new snow on top of about eight inches of old.

"Not so bad!" he mused, relieved.

But then a sight met his eyes which gave him a start. He saw man tracks, a double line of them, in this new snow. How could that be? he wondered. He knew Molly hadn't been out. Riff had not escaped. Who could have made that double line of footprints, which led from the barn to the house and back again?

Joe unbuttoned his sheepskin coat so that his hand might be convenient to his gun, the gun that had belonged to Riff. Warily he followed those mysterious tracks from house to barn.

Once in the barn, Joe passed on down the aisle between stalls toward the door giving into the rear lean-to, the lean-to which enclosed the box stall sheltering the gray gelding of Bill Riff. The mule and the bay pony, he could see, were all right. But before he reached the door of the lean-to he heard a horse coughing raucously from beyond it. The nature of the cough was plain. It was what Joe had expected from the first. Too much dusty feed had obviously infected Riff's gray with the ailment known as heaves.

Joe conceded that there was an especial reason for it, too. Of the three equines, the box-stalled gray was the most likely to get the heaves. The closer-confined the horse, the less fresh air it breathes, the more susceptible it becomes to the heaves.

But when Saguache Joe opened the door leading into the lean-to he ran into a surprise. There, jerking at the padlock on the door of the box stall, stood Mike Lambert of the Soup Dish. Joe stiffened, hand to the butt of his gun. So Lambert had made those tracks to the house! Had he peered in a window and espied the prone and bound form of Riff?

Lambert whirled at Joe's intrusion. Joe faced him, hand on gun. Lambert did not draw. Joe, not wishing to force a showdown, inquired:

"What you doin', Lambert?"

By now he could see through the open rear door of the lean-to that Lam-

bert's riding horse was standing behind the barn in a position to be screened from the house.

"Just heard a horse heavin' in here," was Lambert's excuse. "I thought he might need a leetle fresh air. What you got him locked up for?"

"That's a sick hoss," explained Joe. "Don't want him infecting the other stock."

"Heaves ain't contagious."

"Look here, Lambert," snapped Joe. "Riff left me in charge at this end and he left you to do the hauling. I'll tend to my end and you tend to yours. Ain't you goin' to haul no cake today?"

"No," grumbled Lambert, all the while eying the gun butt on which Joe's hand rested. "That's what I rid down to tell you. Snow's too deep for hauling."

"All right," replied Joe. "But why didn't you knock on the door and tell me that, when you came up to the house a while ago?"

"I ain't been to the house," denied Lambert.

"The hell you didn't. Your tracks are there to prove it."

"Whose tracks?" yelped Lambert. "And say, who you think you are, anyway? And—"

With a movement too swift for the eye to follow, Lambert shot from his thigh; he did not draw, but through the end of his holster he sent a .45 bullet at Saguache Joe.

Yet so quick was the shot that the aim might have been improved. The slug, aimed at Joe's chest, tore through the biceps muscle of his right arm, jerking his hand from his own gun butt. Joe did not fall; he stood there, braced for Lambert's second shot. Lambert advanced and punched his gun into Joe's stomach, then resumed his interrupted question.

"And what you doin' with Bill Riff's gun? I'd know it if I seen it in the Maine woods. Bill packed it for five years."

Joe attempted no retort. He stood there, speechless, abusing his own carelessness, expecting each instant to be run through with a bullet. Mike Lambert disarmed him in a trice.

Then from the porch of the ranchhouse, some thirty yards in front of the barn, came the cry of Molly Hifeldt:

"Joe—Joe, what's the matter? Was that you shooting?"

"So your name's Joe," sneered Lambert, "'stead of Luke Ganzel. And you was totin' Riff's gun. It's plain as day you got Riff's gray hoss locked up in this stall."

Bitterly Joe abused himself for not having shot and buried the infernal gray horse. And then his mind struck another snag of worry. Not expecting anyone from the Soup Dish to pass so early that morning, he had not yet taken his usual precaution of gagging Riff. If Molly Hifeldt had heard the shot from the house, why not Riff? A shot would signify to Riff a conflict with his own crowd, and loosen his profane tongue.

At the very same moment a mighty bull-like roar was indeed heard from the ranch house. Adobe walls could not cage its piercing, rage-fed volume. It struck upon the ears of Mike Lambert, and upon those of Saguache Joe. It was, of course, the vociferous bellow of Bill Riff.

"Yeow! Lambert! Stumpy! Tucker! Pete! Come git me out o' here."

Joe knew that the game was up. Lambert, jamming his gun fiercely against Joe's ribs, summed up the sit-

uation completely.

"I see! Riff's bronc locked in this box stall! Riff's gun in your belt! And Riff himself hog-tied in the house! I oughter put one through you, feller, but I'll save that chore for Riff. Turn around now and promenade to the house."

When he was halfway to the porch, Joe heard the sounds of wagon wheels crunching along the main road from the south. He turned his head and saw, approaching from the direction of the Soup Dish, two wagons, each manned by two men.

"I was kidding you," jeered Lambert. "I just wanted a excuse to come ahead and spy around. The Soup Dish is all present and accounted for, feller, and you got a running start toward bad luck."

Chapter Seven

The Law Rides In

MOLLY HIFELDT stood on the porch, petrified with dread at the menace of Lambert. Lambert drew a second gun and covered her. Then he marched both Joe and the girl into the house, to the room occupied by Riff. Once there, Joe verified the fact that the window shade was pulled down. Thus Lambert, who apparently had made a trip of espionage from barn to house earlier, could not have peered in and seen Riff.

Riff lay prone in his bonds, roaring like a buffalo bull. A few strokes from Lambert's knife and he was freed. He came to his feet and leaped murderously on Saguache Joe. Knowing he was scheduled for annihilation anyway, Joe shot his left fist into Riff's black jowl and sent him reeling backward.

The advantage was of no strategic account, as the only two guns in the room were held by Lambert. Lambert brought one of them down with a crack on Joe's skull, stretching him on the floor. Then Mike handed the other gun to Riff.

Molly Hifeldt screamed.

Riff, righting himself, took the gun, and stood over Joe like a blood-starved fiend. His face, unshaven now for four days, swollen with rage, was an image of black, ripe vengeance unleashed. He pointed his gun downward at Joe's heart and squeezed the trigger. Again Molly Hifeldt screamed; her hands were clutching at her pale throat, and she fainted. She toppled against Riff, then slithered to the floor. The contact dislodged the stance of Riff at the instant of trigger squeeze. The bullet smashed through the floor, missing Joe by a foot.

Smoke drifted upward from Riff's gun. Riff did not shoot again. The fainting of the girl seemed to take a small portion of starch from his temper; the white-hot peak of his fury passed and made space for a modicum of reason. He looked down at the two at his feet, the fainted girl and Saguache Joe, from whose right sleeve a trickle of blood dripped.

"Better take him outside, Riff," suggested Lambert. "This ain't no place for a bump-off. We got to figure how this is goin' to look afterwards. Our boys are outside now."

The advice was sound. Joe, lying on the floor, watched the hot eyes of Riff and saw that the man had started to think; and Joe knew that a thinking man very seldom kills in cold blood.

Perhaps Riff was recalling the Bert Hifeldt case. From that killing Riff had been acquitted because Bert had invaded the Riff house. But now Riff was in the Hifeldt house. In court the thing might weigh against Riff.

Obviously Lambert was thinking of this too, for he said:

"Listen, Riff; suppose you ventilate this jasper! What do we get out of it? Nothing but another long killing trial and a fee to pay some lawyer. Why not simply have this guy pinched for holding you up on the road and stealing your horse? It's easy proved he stole your horse, because the gray's locked in a box stall. Bet the key's in this feller's pockets right now."

Lambert stooped and frisked Joe's pocket. At his first touch he found a slim padlock key. He restored it to the pocket.

"That's the deadwood," went on Lambert. "Then we can sue the Half Circle H for confining you and forcing you to write that letter; we'll get judgment for their whole layout, land, cows, and car o' cake."

If there had been meat in Lambert's first advice, this latter amplification had all the trimmings of a banquet. All the known crimes so far had been committed by the Half Circle H. Why shouldn't the Soup Dish cash in on them?

"We'll talk it over with the boys," grumbled Riff, sheathing his gun.

They prodded Saguache Joe to his feet and hustled him from the house. Outside, the Soup Dish wagons were drawn up. The four men in charge of them had heard the last shot and were scurrying toward the house. Midway between house and barn Joe was imprisoned between a circle of six Soup Dish men, who held heated conclave over his fate.

Three of them—Stumpy, Tucker and Pete—agreed with Lambert's advice. They had a perfect court case against Joe and the Half Circle H; so why not let it ride at that? The fourth man of this morning's wagon crew, however, disagreed. He counseled Joe's immediate execution.

"Dead men tell no tales," he said.

"Shut up, Goofy," rebuked Lambert. "This guy ain't got no tale to tell. He don't know a thing."

Joe sized up Goofy. He had never seen the man before. He was a little rat-faced two-gunner with badly pink eyes.

Riff addressed him, asking, "When did you get back, Goofy?"

"Last night," replied Goofy, "and everything went slick as a whistle. Got rid of them goods down around Sandov—"

"Shut your trap, Goofy," snarled Lambert, scowling at the rat-faced man and sending a furtive glance toward Saguache Joe. "That's neither here nor there, no way. Point is, what do we do with this jasper who claimed he was Luke Ganzel and who turns out to be Joe somebody?"

"But look!" exclaimed Stumpy, pointing toward the Half Circle H road gate. "Who's that turning in from the main road?"

Everyone looked, and saw that a lone rider was entering the gate. He was a fat man with long walrus whiskers and was mounted on a pinto horse. There was an instant of suspense until he was recognized, and then Riff announced sourly:

"I guess that settles it. We'll play this turn like Mike called it. Here comes Baldy Jarrett—star, guns, and all."

"The sheriff, b-gosh!" exclaimed Goofy, immediately uneasy. He unbuckled both of his holster flaps.

"Behave yourself, Goofy," cautioned Lambert. "It couldn't be better. Me, I'm daggone glad Baldy showed up, because now we can show him the evidence and romp hard on the Half Circle H."

Sheriff Baldy Jarrett rode up. He sat there for a moment, eyeing the group sharply, while his gloved hands stroked icicles from the ends of his mustaches.

His first question came as a complete surprise.

"Is Oscar Hifeldt around here?" he asked, with a queer inflection in his voice.

None of his hearers had expected mention of Oscar Hifeldt.

"No. Why?" responded Mike Lambert.

"I want to ask him where he was the afternoon of the eighth," said Jarrett.

At the same time it was plain that the sheriff sensed some unnatural situation in the group before him; his eyes moved from man to man questioningly, and his mind seemed to be straying from his own words.

"We ain't seen Oscar Hifeldt," said Lambert warily, not knowing what might be up. "We been haulin' cake out here the last two-three days and Oscar ain't showed himself. Why?"

"A masked man held up the Alamosa bank on the eighth," informed Jarrett. "The sheriff of that county just sent me the description, and it kind of fits Oscar Hifeldt. Moreover, Oscar had been in the bank that morning, asking for a loan. He got turned down and was purty sore about it."

"Anybody get shot at the holdup?" asked the Soup Dish man called Pete.

"No, and the fellah was run off before he got any spondulix; so they was no big devilment done. Howsomever, I thought I'd just have a heart-to-heart talk with Oscar about it to see if he's got a alibi."

"If he's been around here we ain't seen him," insisted Lambert. "But say, Jarrett, lay off that job and horn in on another. We wants this jasper"—Mike pointed at Saguache Joe—"pinched."

"What for?"

Bill Riff came to the front, and in a raucous bellow he delivered the full score of the Soup Dish's grievances. He wound up with:

"Pinch this fellah, Sheriff, and pinch him hard."

Jarrett was naturally much interested. He eyed Joe shrewdly, all the while stroking icicles from his mustaches.

"Well, what's your side of this song and dance, young man?" he asked.

Joe felt that his best bet was to keep silent and wait until he had legal advice. The trouble was that Riff had told the absolute truth. The truth is always hard to combat, so Joe made no attempt to do so.

On the other hand, Mike Lambert became voluble.

"It's open and shut, Baldy," he told the sheriff. "Evidence? Why, they's oodles of it."

"Name a specific charge and show me a specific point of evidence," suggested the sheriff.

"Easy as pie," said Lambert gloatingly. "In the first place, he's a hoss thief caught with the goods locked up and the key in his pocket. He—"

"Talk louder, Lambert," suggested Jarrett. "Them dang cows out there in the feed lot are making so much racket

I can't hardly hear you."

Thus Mike Lambert had to raise his voice.

"This gent's got a padlock key in his pants pocket," he told Jarrett. "You'll find the key fits the lock of a box stall at the back of the barn. Everybody knows Riff's big iron-gray gelding, of course. Well, that gray is locked in the box stall. It got heaves last night and that's how I come to hear it."

"If that's the case," responded Jarrett as he dismounted, "I reckon I can make a pinch. Hoss thief caught with the goods is the same as a warrant."

He came to Joe and searched his pocket. In a moment he produced a small, slim key. Then the eight men of the party, Lambert holding Joe fast by his unwounded arm, proceeded to the barn. When they came opposite a box stall in the rear lean-to, they could hear the coughing of a heave-stricken horse within.

The others stood back, allowing Jarrett to try the key in the padlock. It was an exact fit. Jarrett threw the door open. The stall was gloomy, almost dark. Joe and his captors waited in the aisle while the sheriff entered the box to bring out the horse.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Deadwood on the Soup Dish

ALL the while the six hundred cows on the premises were bawling louder and louder for their daily ration of cake.

"Hey, Sheriff! Quit foolin' with that horse and go up to the house and see about Miss Hlfeldt," Joe called.

But just then Sheriff Baldy Jarrett emerged from the box stall. He was leading, to the consternation of all eyes, not an iron-gray gelding but a strawberry-roan mare. A strawberry roan!

The Soup Dish men gaped. Yet no one was more surprised than Saguache Joe. Amazement chopped his speech in two as he gazed upon the familiar lines of his own horse. His own! The same horse of which he had been robbed at the water tank four days ago, many miles up the railroad. How had the mare come in this stall? It was like a conjuror's trick.

"You're barkin' up the wrong tree, Riff," announced Jarrett, scowling suspiciously at the Soup Dish owner. "Your evidence ain't worth a pinch of salt. Gray hoss me eye! This here's a strawberry roan."

"It's my own horse," announced Joe evenly, determined to take quick advantage of this gift of the gods. "Here, Strawberry, old girl, how you feelin' this morning?"

He whistled, and the mare came up to him, nuzzling her nose in his hand.

"My own mare," repeated Joe. "Why haven't I got a right to lock up my own bronc? It's these Soup Dishers who're crooks, Sheriff. They—"

Riff, Lambert, Pete, Tucker, and Goofy all interrupted with roars of rebuttal. For several minutes the barn aisle was a bedlam of angry debate. Yet it was plain that the Soup Dish crowd had lost a trick; they were on the defensive; their false lead certainly hadn't helped their brief with the sheriff. Jarrett seemed to become more and more suspicious that Riff's story was all a trumped-up lie, although actually Riff had given out only the pure truth. But no one could explain how the strawberry roan happened to be

in the stall.

Finally Joe made himself heard. He insisted that the sheriff go to the relief of Molly Hifeldt.

Jarrett agreed. So the entire crowd moved up the aisle toward the front door of the barn. As they emerged they were confronted by a party of men and horses—unexpected guests who seemed to have arrived during the colloquy within.

The group included three cowboys, each mounted, and four loose horses of draft breed.

Saguache Joe, at sight of the riders, cried out joyfully:

"Well, look who's here! Howdy, Steve; and Hod, you old buzzard, how's your corporosity? And darned if here ain't old Four-finger, sober for once in his life!"

Indeed here had arrived, whether opportunely or not, Joe's three friends from Sandoval. Moreover, they had fetched along two draft teams that Joe had mentioned in his wire.

Face to face at the barn door of the Half Circle H the two groups confronted each other. One accused horse thief, one sheriff, six members of the Soup Dish clan, and three newcomers from Sandoval.

Jarrett asked abruptly, "Who are you *hombres?*"

"We're pals of Saguache Joe," announced Steve Elkins, his eyes fixed not on the sheriff but on a blood drop that fell from Joe's right sleeve and made a crimson circle in the snow.

And then Steve's eyes moved to rest upon the horsey mug of Mike Lambert, who, standing at Joe's side, was holding fast to Joe's left arm.

Joe's own attention was drawn to the little rat-faced Soup Disher, Goofy. Goofy was displaying an extreme agitation. Horses seemed to interest him more than men. He was staring at the four heavy draft animals which had been driven up by Steve Elkins's crowd. And now he leaped to one side and whipped out two .45's, crying:

"Soup Dish to the left; it's a frame!"

Crack!

To the amazement of Joe, and more than ever to the amazement of Sheriff Baldy Jarrett, Goofy fired a gun point-blank at Steve Elkins. At the same instant Riff, Lambert, Pete, Tucker, and Stumpy all jumped to the left, joining Goofy.

Lambert bawled, "Sure it's a frame. I see it all now. Pop it to 'em, Riff."

Goofy's bullet had unsaddled Elkins. He sprawled in the snow on all fours under his horse. An instant later everyone in the crowd except Saguache Joe was shooting. Joe had no gun. Nor could he understand the sudden attack of the Soup Dish. Why, when things were going reasonably well their way, should they start a fight?

Jarrett must have been thinking the same thing, for amidst a roar of shots he yelled:

"Hey, you Soup Dish, put up them guns. What—"

But just then a bullet from Lambert's gun, aimed at Joe, creased the sheriff's cheek. It made him angry, and the law immediately took sides. Jarrett drew steel and began pumping lead at the compact group of the Soup Dish. Seconds before this Hod Slavins and Four-finger Fox, although not knowing what it was all about, had come to action. Fox was blazing a stream of red flame squarely into the enemy's teeth. Slavins was hit, but clung to his saddle, firing his gun five times. Steve Elkins crawled out from under his horse, produced a gun, and shot Lam-

bert dead.

The melee was short. Such deadly exchange of fire could not last long. The only contribution which Saguache Joe could make to the fight was to pick up a branding iron that lay near by and crack Stumpy over the head. Of gunmen, there were ten in the combat. In half that number of seconds all of them except Four-finger Fox were dead or down. It was Steve Elkins, sprawled under his horse, who finished off Tucker and Riff. Hod Slavins, after knocking down one Soup Disher, slid over his horse's tail, himself shot through the groin. Sheriff Baldy Jarrett was on his knees, creased twice but not badly hurt, when the firing ceased. It ceased because of all the Soup Dishers, only Stumpy and Goofy were alive.

Goofy, by a strange chance, was unhit. He threw away his gun, fell to the snow in front of Jarrett, and bawled for mercy.

"What the hell did you start this fight for?" screamed Jarrett.

"It was the deadwood, wasn't it?" whined Goofy. "They brought them Half Circle H horses back, didn't they? What I sold in Sandoval? It was the deadwood on the Soup Dish. You fellahs framed us, all right."

"If it's a frame, it's the first I heard of it," said Jarrett.

"Me, too," added Saguache Joe.

"Us, too," amended Four-finger Fox.

Steve Elkins crawled out from under his horse and arose unsteadily to his feet.

"We got your wire, Joe," he explained, "sayin' to fetch along a couple of hay teams, and we done it. Why —did we bring back some rustled stock?"

"I reckon you didn't do nothin' else," admitted Joe, as he observed that the four loose horses were marching in single file, unprodded, into the barn, as though into an accustomed home. He saw their brands, now, Half Circle H.

Jarrett, Fox, and Elkins seemed to be in shape to look after the dead and wounded. Joe himself lost no time in getting to the ranch house. Once there, he found that Molly Hifeldt had but a moment before come out of her faint.

He found her in the hall, half paralyzed with dread. She had heard the shooting. Joe, unmindful of the wound in his own arm, took masterful charge of her. He refused to let her go to the door. He didn't want her to see the bodies stretched here and there on the blood-smeared snow.

"It's all right," he told her. "Everything's all right. Don't worry. Sheriff Baldy Jarrett's out there, and he's handling everything."

"The sheriff!" cried Molly. "Did he catch my brother? Oscar?"

"'Course not," answered Joe, as he steered the reeling girl into her own room and forced her to a chair. "Oscar Hifeldt wasn't in this fight. What made you think he was?"

"He was here last night," the girl said.

"Here last night? Did you see him?"

"No. But sometime during the night this was thrown into my window."

Molly took from her pocket a cylindrical object, wrapped in white paper.

In a flash Joe recalled the fresh man tracks in the snow, leading from barn to house and return. Perhaps Mike Lambert, thought Joe, had told the truth! Maybe those tracks were not, after all, chargeable to Lambert.

And now Joe removed the white pa-

per from the cylinder. The wrapping was a penciled note. The cylinder itself was a fat roll of bills.

The note read:

Dear Sis:

It's better I keep moving south, but here's some money to help you take care of the ranch. I'll just stop long enough to get a fresh horse. Goodby.

—OSCAR

Molly Hifeldt, for all her inbred Dutch restraint, began crying.

"Does that mean," she worried, "that Oscar stole this money and is on the dodge?"

Joe shook his head; for he recognized that roll of bills. Once it had been his own. It was the same wad that had been filched from him by the man who had stepped out from under the water tank. So then, thought Joe, it was Oscar Hifeldt who, desperate to get funds for the Half Circle H, had taken his money and horse. The rest was, of course, easy. Wanting a fresh horse last night, Oscar would hardly have exchanged for the old bay cow pony or for the yellow mule. The only good horse in the barn had been the gray gelding, and Oscar could easily have had a key to that padlock on his key ring.

So Saguache Joe shook his head.

"No," he told Molly, "I reckon your brother didn't steal that money. He just borrowed it somewhere and aimed to pay it back. The fact is he's already paid it back."

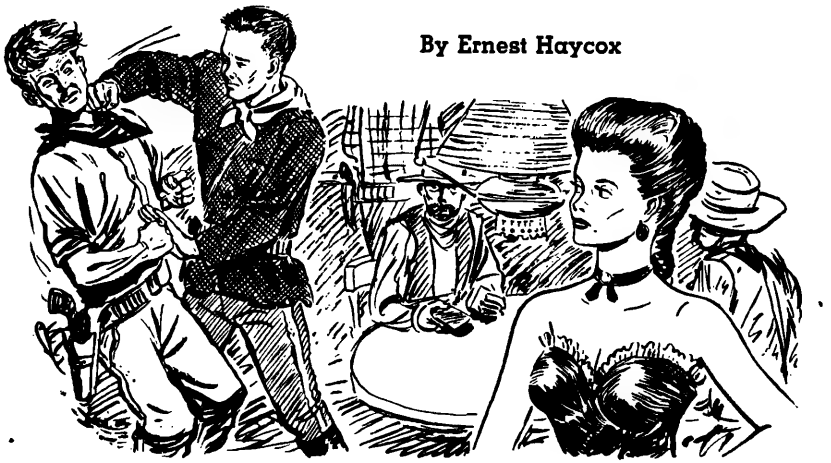
"What do you mean?" exclaimed Molly; her eyes, lustrous with tears, opened wide as she looked up at Saguache Joe.

The true answer spoke in Joe's heart, although with his lips he merely said, "Yes, he's already paid it back."

For he knew that he owed a great debt to Oscar Hifeldt. Oscar had bequeathed him an excuse to stay on the Half Circle H for good. How could he leave Molly Hifeldt? Oscar and he had exchanged goals, that was all. Joe could only wish the man good luck and a fast track, south over the mesas, on the road to Sandoval.

THE END

Alike, somehow, are the two of them—young recruit Bob McIntyre and Louisa, the gambler's girl with the dancing eyes and the red, red lips.



By Ernest Haycox

Skirmish at Dry Fork

IN 1875 the Army of the United States was a thing of fragments all along the Western frontier from the Rio Grande to Montana—a battalion stationed in this desolate and scarcely habitable post, a company in that one, a sergeant and six men guarding some stage relay station far out on the old Butterfield route, a jaded brevet major general once commanding his tens of thousands at Gettysburg now leading a skeleton half-regiment across Dakota's bake-oven plain in search of Sioux, who maneuvered as shadows before him. The Army was a thin and ragged bulwark separating the discontented plains tribes from the slow advance of ranches and raw new towns springing up beside the cattle trails.

Squatted beside the sands of the inch-deep Arkansas, Fort Sumner was such a post, garrisoned by four troops of cavalry; and Dry Fork, two miles east of it, was such a cattle town, newly born of the cattle trail's trade and lush with a sin no newer and no different than the sin of Babylon.

The paymaster this day had visited Fort Sumner for the first time in three months and now the enlisted men of the four troops of the post, made gaunt and salty by long abstinence, considered the pleasures of Dry Fork and prepared to move upon it. Supper was done, the sunset gun had sounded as hot twilight faded into hot dusk, and in D Troop's messroom First Sergeant Maurice O'Boyle lectured the

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dozen troopers who had secured passes to town:

"Dry Fork is full of cowpunchers, stoppin' off for the evenin' on their way up to Montana with cattle—and there never was a cowpuncher that liked a soldier. It is likewise full of scoundrels and thieves waitin' for our pay and meanin' to get it. Those ones hate the sight of us, even as they hide behind the shelter we make for 'em. The night marshal is nothin' but an outlaw with a star on and he will be waitin' for us, rememberin' the fuss we made last month. We will have our fun, but we stick together and we start no quarrels alone. I want that understood."

He was talking to an odd lot: to veterans of the Civil War, to raw lads from the East, to men with inglorious pasts well hidden, to men like Jem Chatto who had been in the Army since the year of the flood. He was talking also to Bob McIntyre, the newest soldier in the troop and a boy with the rose-blush of youth still upon him, innocently honest of eye, and knowing little enough of sin. And, particularly, the sergeant was talking to himself, thoroughly aware of his own weakness. After twenty years of paydays the sergeant looked forward to this night with mixed relish and apprehension.

"Mind me now," he said, "or you'll be doin' thirty days, and that is my promise."

He led the group out of the messroom doorway, casting a quick glance above him at the mud-and-pole eaves where the tarantulas liked to hang poised in sinister furry balls. They set out through the post and took to the town road, other groups from other troops moving before them in the deepening dark. Two miles forward the town lights made a sultry glow through the shadows. Sergeant O'Boyle fell back and came upon Jem Chatto, the two walking together.

"Now the lad," murmured O'Boyle, indicating Bob McIntyre, "is entirely new at this and we must be bearin' an eye upon him. It is right he should wet his whistle and howl at the moon and maybe have a word with a girl. All this we'll be showin' him for the first time. But he has got an honest face and the scoundrels will see it at once and rob him. We keep by him tonight, Jem. He knows nothin' of the rough ways. We must be teachin' him a bit at a time. A pair of old dogs workin' on a pup, hey, Jem?"

"I will keep as close as you keep," said Jem Chatto, and grinned out of his scarred and tough-cornered face. "And I will get no drunker than you get."

"Ah," sighed O'Boyle, "I am dry clear to the linin' of my shoes and I dread this night—I do indeed."

They were a pair of wise, leathery, half-tamed men with twenty years apiece in the Army, scarred by a hundred honorable engagements and by countless barroom brawls, cool and resourceful and worth their weight in gold to any company commander under fire, but mortally weak in the soft hours of pleasure.

Sergeant O'Boyle observed Bob McIntyre's stolid shape in the darkness before him. "Fresh from a farm in Ohio and burnin' for adventures. He's still got the plow walk on him. Once I was like that, but it would have been better had I stayed with the farm."

"A woman?" said Jem Chatto.

"It was," grimly agreed O'Boyle.

Young Bob McIntyre moved with his

companions along the road to Dry Fork. He blushed a little at the talk of the men around him, which was the hungriest kind of talk, and he remembered what everybody had said of this town's danger and wickedness and sharp needles weaved excitement all through him. Not that he was afraid; a little fun and maybe one drink and the sight of something new would be all right.

The town was one long street beside the river, backed by dark alleys. They came upon the street and went forward until somebody called out with a voice as smooth as butter, "One minute, soldiers." The group stopped, O'Boyle and Jem Chatto immediately advancing to the front.

A man stood beside a water barrel, underneath the overhanging gallery of a building; he was half in the shadows, lean like a cat and with a set of great tawny mustaches and a long face with big cheekbones and eyes that had a soft yellow glow in them. A star hung loosely on his shirt.

"Boys," he said, "have you got any guns?"

"No guns," said O'Boyle.

"That's fine," said the night marshal. "I'm rememberin' last time. Have your fun and let it go like that." He moved on at a soft, prowling step.

O'Boyle said, "We'll try The Bucket first," and moved on to the next building and to the next door.

Out of The Bucket came the warm and lively racket of men talking, of women's high voices, of the plunk of a piano and a guitar. The smell of whisky and tobacco and dust and heat all rode together and the smell was good but the thought of the women in The Bucket embarrassed Bob McIntyre and he blushed and would as soon have gone on to a straight saloon. There was no chance of that. O'Boyle and Chatto were to either side of him, grinning.

O'Boyle said, "Now, my lad, we'll show you the tiger." D Troop moved solidly into The Bucket.

It was as big a room as he had ever seen; half of it was a dance floor—on which couples swung like dervishes to fast music—and the other half was the saloon proper, with a bar maybe eighty feet long, a string of pool tables and poker tables and other gambling-rigs, all in full go. He counted six barkeeps standing against the flash and glitter of the back bar and smoke hung through the place like a prairie fog and the racket was something tremendous. D Troop made a solid rank at the bar, shoulder to shoulder, crowding the other customers somewhat and producing the first spark of untimely feeling. Bob McIntyre was still between O'Boyle and Chatto, and the sergeant was greatly amused, but young McIntyre saw an expression reach the sergeant's face—thirsty and struggling —as the bottle came before him.

"We will all have one," said the sergeant in a hurried voice, "and then we will be about our sightseein'. Nothin' like this in Ohio, hey, Bob?"

There was not, young Bob agreed, and shuddered from shoulder to instep as the liquor went its scalding route down his throat.

The music stopped and the girls promenaded their partners to the bar. D Troop had somewhat scattered, so that one girl brought her man to the space beside Bob McIntyre and suddenly close upon him and around about him was a fragrance like nothing else. She wore a black dress with a gold crust along its low front and her skin

was an ivory shade and her body round and full and strong. He looked up to very black hair puffed out on her forehead, into a pair of eyes that casually came to him and then looked at him with interest; he saw light dancing in them, and she smiled and her teeth were white against the redness of her lips.

She had ginger beer while her partner drank a whisky. The music began again, the announcer bawling, "Choose your partners!" She turned away, fragrance moving with her. A cowpuncher came across the floor toward her, his spurs jingling and scraping and at the same moment O'Boyle murmured:

"Now, lad, could you be spendin' four bits a better way than with Ed Taggart's girl?"

Maybe it was the lift in the sergeant's voice and maybe it was the fragrance that turned a key in him; but he did this on the turn of the moment, moving to her and reaching her at the same moment the cowpuncher arrived.

"If you're dancin'," he said, "I'd be obliged for this one."

The puncher said, "Ride on, dragoon. I threw my rope first."

"Maybe," said young Bob McIntyre, "you missed your throw." The girl was standing close to him and that made him feel strong. He heard the puncher say, "I won't miss this one," and he saw the flash and explosion of the puncher's temper. He put up his palm just as the puncher struck; he pushed the blow aside and he delivered a young mule kick straight upon the puncher's face and saw him fall back and down.

He felt wonderful. He took the girl's arm, and he was smiling, and he led her toward the dance floor. She wasn't smiling. She said in a hurried whisper, "Watch out—he has friends," and behind him was Sergeant O'Boyle's calm growl: "That was the lad's private fight and don't nobody pile on him unless they expect fun."

The cowpuncher rolled on the floor and he gave a whoop as he rose; it was a war cry that lifted through the house and made its impelling demand upon all men from Texas, and at once Texans rose from the poker tables and piled off the dance floor and rushed from the outside. D Troop, under the command of Sergeant O'Boyle, dressed ranks and received the attack frontally.

Bob McIntyre bore down upon his first antagonist, who had risen from the floor; the puncher had a blind way of fighting that did him no good. Young Bob sidestepped two wild charges and moved into action before the third one started. He took a pair of light blows on the chest, cracked the puncher in the side of the neck in about the same manner he would have jolted a horse out of its desire to buck, and watched the puncher settle like a tired man.

He thought this was all and was mistaken, for somebody reached him with a stunning whack on the back of his head, throwing him a yard forward. He stumbled around, saw his man and felt unjustly used.

"That wasn't right," he said, and anger made him righteous and he went at the second rider without bothering to duck or sidestep. He simply whaled into the fellow, his chunky fists shaking the other one substantially, driving him toward the saloon wall.

It looked as if half of Texas had immigrated to The Bucket. D Troop was a thin blue line against which the Texas tide broke; a rebel yell went harry-

ing through the place and the fight split into pairs of men circling and parrying and ramming home quick punches, and circling again. Chatto went down under a sudden drive by two Texas men, but as he fell he swept one man with him, rolled and kicked him in the head with both heavy shoes, rolled again and went roaring at the second puncher and drove him against the bar.

A file of A Troop came quickly into the saloon and deployed to study the scene. O'Boyle's voice halted them where they were: "Keep out of this! We're doin' all right!"

Young Bob's new antagonist was a stout one and got at young Bob's face. Young Bob's anger became a white heat in him. He marched ahead, driving the other one backward; he hammered him full on the jaw, left hand and right, and then watched him sink away.

There wasn't as much noise in the place. Turning, he saw that everything had quit. The punchers had simply sworn off, having had enough, and D Troop stood by, somewhat the worse for wear but still in command of the field.

O'Boyle said, "Right dress on the bar, boys, and we'll take the sting out of this."

The music came on, reminding young Bob of something he had started. He walked over to the girl, smiling again.

"I guess I got initiated."

She was entirely serious: "You're new, aren't you? Never did this before?"

The way she said it—as from an experience and a maturity he could not reach—caused him to blush and feel his youth. She was as young as he was, but she made him feel younger.

"Dancin'," he said, "ain't so much my line. I'd like to sit and talk."

He saw a door standing open at the back end of the saloon, and beyond it a private poker room. The elation of the fight continued in him, the feeling of confidence still stretched his chest. He smiled and he took her arm, leading her toward the room. As they passed into it she gave him a darkly troubled glance and lifted her eyes across the room to a poker table and to one man there—to a long and pale and inexpressive gambler who now watched this.

O'Boyle and Chatto both witnessed the closing of that door upon the girl and young Bob. Chatto said, "He picked Ed Taggart's girl. We better get ready for trouble."

Young Bob stood in the back room, watching her. She circled the room, she came to the table and sat down, her eyes shining in the lamp's light. She wasn't smiling; she was grave and her glance held trouble. She was a pretty woman, her skin smooth, and her shoulders trim and strong.

She said, "You are new, or you wouldn't have closed that door. Likely you'll be shot for it."

"I heard O'Boyle make mention of you and Ed Taggart. Who's he?"

"The tall gambler at the end poker table."

"I had one look at him," said young Bob. "Gamblin' ain't a healthy trade. I could snap him in two with my hands."

"You would never reach him with your hands," she said. "Don't you know his kind? How old are you?"

"Twenty-three," said young Bob. "You ain't quite that, are you?"

"Twenty-one," she said, and now she

gave him a full survey.

He was a heavy-legged boy, square on his feet, with a big chest and dark short hair and his face had that bright ruddiness which reminded her of a frosty winter morning. His eyes were a youthful blue and innocent, and yet he saw her as a woman and was very pleased.

"You married to him?" he asked.

She said, briefly, "No," and added, "Maybe we had better go out now and dance."

"I don't want to dance," he said. "I want to stand here and watch you."

He was quiet about it and in his quietness was a grown man's certainty. He walked around the table until he was by her chair, and his presence made her rise and face him. The quietness left him and he was smiling and he felt reckless and bigger than anything in the world and his heart was in his eyes. He looked at her as many men had looked at her, but back of the look was something that made her want to cry and run away, because it was nicer and deeper than the way other men looked. He lifted his arms to her and brought her shoulders forward and he kissed her and for a moment she was motionless, letting him have his kiss but giving him nothing back. He stepped away, showing his disappointment.

"Why," he said, "I didn't mean it cheap. Outside of my mother and sisters, you're the first woman I have ever touched. That's the way I meant it."

"It won't be the last," she said. "Now you're another trooper, like your friends. You'll be coming here, or some place, every pay night."

He said, "I guess I didn't make you understand."

"You ought to have a nice girl," she said. "A nice girl somewhere in the East. You ought to marry."

"Maybe so," he said. "But first I'm goin' on west until I find a place I can stand and look a hundred miles any direction. There's where I stop and build my log house and start my cattle. And they'll just grow until they crowd over the edge of the distance."

"Write all this to some girl in the East," she said. "Some nice girl."

She heard a scuffling beyond the door; she heard voices rising, and concern darkened her expression. She turned down the lamp and beckoned young Bob toward the room's back door. She opened it and led him to the street. They walked along it, past The Bucket's front and past the sign in the window of the stage office. He stopped her here.

"If I had a wife I'd go to Rainwater Station. That's west—that's gettin' closer to where I'm goin'."

She pulled him on and turned the corner, into an alley. They came to a building huddled in the dark, to an outside stairway rising to a second floor. He looked at it and he looked at her.

"You live here?"

"You get back to the fort," she said. "You don't know these gamblers and townspeople. They stick together. Taggart will have them all looking for you."

"You like him well enough to stick with him?" he asked.

She went upward three steps and turned to look down. "Don't be so young," she whispered.

"What good would a nice girl do me?" he asked. "She'd never leave the East. If she did she'd cry for carpets and curtains. The dust would make her

miserable and she'd always be wantin' to go back home. I like the dust, I like everything here. The kind of a woman I want is one who ain't goin' to cry where I take her, who'll like it where I am, who'll sleep where I sleep. Niceness and neatness ain't for this country."

She sat down on the steps, long watching him, closely listening. "You're very practical," she said at last.

"Maybe I am," he said. He pointed at the darkness westward. "I want to go out there. I want to see it all—and take the best of what I see. But I don't want to go alone and I want somebody like I am."

She put her cheeks in her hands, silent and studying. Her glance remained with him, dark and strange and absorbed. Suddenly she rose and stood above him on the steps. She lifted her shoulders and let them fall and her voice was small.

"Go back to the fort before Taggart finds you," she said, and walked up the stairs.

He watched her pause at the landing, look at him once again, and go through the doorway.

He turned through the alley to the street, nothing settled in him, everything churning around. He had never felt like this before. It was like being hungry and seeing food but not being able to eat it. He turned toward The Bucket, deep in thought. The girl had said, "You are very practical." He studied that and he wasn't sure how she had meant it. Maybe it was approval; maybe it wasn't.

The sound in The Bucket grew louder. D Troop came out of the place, O'Boyle and Chatto holding Taggart between them, with Taggart twisting against their grip, his hat fallen away and his lank black hair dropped down across his eyes. He was breathing from the bottom of his shallow lungs and when he saw Bob McIntyre he stood still.

"You," he said, sighing out the words, "get away from here or I'll kill you!"

"Where you been?" said O'Boyle to young Bob. "We waited half an hour and opened the door. You wasn't there."

Young Bob said, "Let him go and we'll see about the killin'."

O'Boyle drew his arms away from Ed Taggart. The gambler took two steps forward.

"Get out of here," he said.

"You got no gun," observed young Bob. "Maybe you could try your hands."

Townsmen came from The Bucket and they had drifted forward from other parts of the street, gamblers and hangers-on from the saloons and dance halls, all noisy up and down the length of the street.

O'Boyle saw that, and murmured to D Troop, "Spread a bit and pick your pigeon."

"Kid," said Taggart, "if you ever come back here again you're a dead one."

The night marshal moved softly and casually out of the alley; he stopped and saw the scene and said, "I warned you, soldiers. Pull out of town—and do it now."

"Your friends here," said O'Boyle coolly, "are a scummy lot."

"They pay my wages," said the marshal, almost lazy with his words.

O'Boyle was the coolest of men in time of trouble; and he knew the odds were not good. The marshal was armed

and so were the townsmen, and no D trooper carried a gun. It was time to retreat. He made a motion with his arm, he grinned at the marshal.

"Sure," he said. "But maybe we'll come back."

O'Boyle gave the forward signal and moved down the street with his crowd. He took young Bob's arm and led him along, and he was still grinning as they marched out of the street's light into the darkness of the prairie.

"Lad," he said, "you saw the town, did you not? You'll be seein' towns like that all the rest of your soldierin' days. There's none of 'em different for a soldier. You did well. You have got an eye for the girls and we'll have some fine fights as paydays come and go. But don't ever go back there alone. They mean what they say. Chatto, it is a lovely night and I did not get drunk."

"You never had a chance," said Chatto, "or you would've."

All along the low horizon the eyes of trail-herd fires winked a bloodshot red, and now and then, campbound punchers raced past, lifting a yell.

Young Bob said, "A married man can always buy his way out of the Army, can't he, Sergeant?"

"It is the regulation," said the sergeant. "But why should a man want to buy himself out of a good life into marriage?"

Young Bob made no comment. He lagged a little as he thought of the girl, until at last he was at the tail of the straggling procession. She had said, "You are a very practical man," and then she had moved up the stairs. The sound of it was like a compliment, but the meaning didn't seem that way to him.

He came to a full stop, hearing the shuffle of feet and the murmuring of talk grow dim as the D troopers moved on toward Fort Sumner. And then he blushed and a warmly embarrassed feeling went through him. He had not made her understand what he meant. He turned immediately around and headed for the lights of town.

Before he got to the street he angled off through the shadows, passed along the edges of dark houses and so came to the alley and to the rooming-house with the outside stairway. He stood off from it and he studied the alley carefully and saw a pair of shapes not far from the foot of the stairway; he saw the butt of a cigar glow. She had called him a practical man and now he guessed it was not praise.

He catfooted through a deep, soft dust, making no sound at all, and he came within a yard of the two men before they heard him or saw him. It was his shadow that drew a grunt out of one of them: "What's up?"

A couple of townsmen, he figured, posted here by Taggart just to keep him from coming back. He wasted no time on answering the question. He hit the man with the cigar one full-sized blow in the pit of the stomach and heard his mortal gasp of agony; that one dropped down and sprawled on his knees. The other reached for his gun and tried to back away for a shot. Young Bob caught him by the neck and spun him and clamped a strangle grip upon him, reaching down and seizing the gun before it was fired. He got the gun and he hit the fellow over the head with it and went up the outside stairs, two at a time.

The upper doorway opened on a long hall; and from the loose edge of another door down the hall he saw a light shining. He went softly to it,

touched the knob, and flung the door open. When he raised his gun it pointed straight at Ed Taggart standing in the middle of the room. The girl was at the window.

"I don't blame you guardin' somethin' you hate to lose," said young Bob. "I know how that is. But you got me figured a little too green. When I'm on a huntin' trip I never give myself away by crackin' a lot of sticks or makin' a lot of noise."

He saw that the gambler had not yet possessed himself of another gun; and so he tucked his own into his trousers. The girl was behind the gambler and her glance came to young Bob, bitter-black with fear. She made a motion, pointing through the window at the alley—and maybe she was trying to warn him of the men down there, not knowing he had taken care of them. The gambler suddenly ran for him and hit him with both fists.

The man was light and didn't much know what to do with his hands. Young Bob batted them down and landed a punch and felt pretty confident; the next minute all the wind went out of him as the gambler's knee drove right into his crotch. He saw the gambler's face as a pale blur before his eyes for a moment, and he stood paralyzed and could not move.

The gambler yelled aloud, "Foxie, come up here!" Then he hit young Bob hard with his fists and grasped him at the throat.

Young Bob took him around the waist and hung on until some desire to fight came back to him. He flung the man around, caught him at the shoulders, and ran him down the hall to the doorway and the landing. He gave him a full-armed pitch and flung him at the railing of the landing. The railing gave way and the gambler went plunging fifteen feet down. Young Bob heard him strike and heard the dull out-pour of wind. He didn't hear the gambler get up.

He went back to the room, feeling bad because of the blow in his crotch. He stood still, a little bit sick, and looked at her.

"You called me practical," he said. "Maybe that was the way it sounded when I said I wanted a woman who wasn't afraid of a little dust. Maybe you figured I just wanted somebody to help me work."

"Ed's got a couple men watching. They'll have the marshal here in a minute. He's a friend of Ed's."

He smiled. "You think I'm practical now?"

She stepped forward until she was directly before him, looking up; he saw the color of her eyes, he saw things moving in her eyes, and the fragrance came around him again.

"When I saw you," he said, "I wanted you. It's never been that way before."

"You're mistaken about me," she said gently. "Your people would never let me inside their house. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"My people are a long way off, at home in bed, thinkin' of nothin' we think. They live one kind of a way in one kind of a land. It may be I'll never see my people again, for this is my country and I mean to see it all and find what I want. I'd figured to travel alone, but then I saw you and I didn't want to travel alone any more."

"You're older than I thought," she said.

He watched the turning of her shoulders, the soft, ample sweep of her breasts. He took hold of her and drew

her forward and watched her lips stir as they lifted.

"Don't make dreams about girls like me," she said in a swift, warning, desperate voice. She had been still in his arms, in the saloon, when he had kissed her. She was not still now. He felt her resistance leave. Her kiss burned him and shocked and roused him and when he drew his head back he saw the fire-glow of her eyes.

"There is no mistake at all," he said. He drew a breath, wishing for words he didn't have. "The truth is I love you—and there is nothin' in the world to stop it."

He noticed strange things in her eyes, a heaviness and a wetness there—and that was a puzzle to him. He saw how her eyes seemed to open and let him in where he had not been before.

He said quietly, "A man can buy his way out of the Army if he's married. Would you mind Rainwater Station?"

"If there's nothing I can do to stop it," she said, "you can take me anywhere you want, whenever you want. I will be what you want, if that is enough for you—if you won't remember where you got me."

The answer went like liquor through him even as he heard the light run of steps along the alley—one man's quick, easy steps. She made him big, she made him feel sharp, great, fine things. She made him smile simply because he could not help it.

"Maybe," he said, very gently, "you could smile."

She smiled and he saw what he wished to see—the strange thing which had drawn him from the bar in The Bucket to claim her. He didn't know what it was, but he knew the wanting of it would never leave him. He would always be coming back to her and expecting to see it, wherever he was. Nothing else made any difference at all; she did this to him and therefore it was enough.

"We will go to the fort," he said. "I think the major can do the marryin'. If he can't I'll find somebody who can. We can be out of the Army in a month, on the way to Rainwater. You can come back for your things later."

"There's nothing here I want to take. I won't come back."

"That's it," he said. "Never go back. That ain't our direction."

"Bob," she whispered. "Give me your gun. I hear Taggart on the stairs. He's too fast for you, but I can take him by surprise when he comes in."

She was alive, she was a fighter, straight and pretty and defiant in the room. That was what he liked—and maybe that was what he had seen; the life in her, the good, common depth that had nothing to do with being nice or ladylike or genteel. He smiled and moved softly into the hall. He heard steps come up the stairs and he reached the doorway and placed himself in a dark corner and stood still with his gun poised overhead.

The marshal paused outside—if it was the marshal—and then the marshal stepped softly inside and young Bob's gun cracked down across his hat and drove all light out of him. The marshal made no sound except when he hit the floor.

The girl ran down the hall. "Bob!" she said.

"He figured I was green and he wasn't careful," he said and took her arm and went down the stairs. There wasn't anything in the alley that he could hear or see; and he cut beside the houses and went straight into the prairie's darkness. Here he stopped.

He said, "What is your name?"

"Louisa."

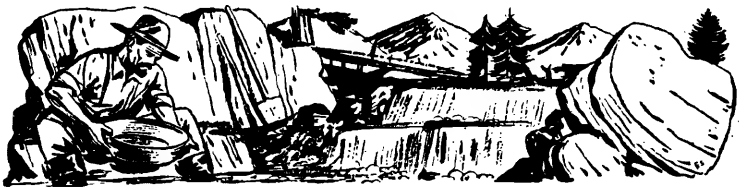
"Louisa," he said, "I'm takin' you to a hard place. Maybe you'll regret this. Maybe I'll be makin' you cry."

"We can't always laugh, can we? I could cry now."

"Why, I'm mighty sorry if I'm makin' you sad."

"It is not that—not that at all. Everything will be so good!"

"That's it," he said, and was quietly laughing in the dark. "The good of just bein' alive. That's why we're alike and that's what I saw in you, standin' in The Bucket. Everything's good, even the worst of it," and he felt the round-shaped print of her lips, and their heat.



"NOT A CHINAMAN'S CHANCE"

THE TENS of thousands of Argonauts who flooded west into California in 1849 brought the end of profitable mining for the Mexicans, Chilenos, Peruvians, and native Californios who had been the first to heed the siren song of gold. These "lesser breeds without the law" either gave up their claims or departed this life—the end result was the same. The divine right to pan the gold-bearing gravels, to mine the stringer-shot quartz, belonged exclusively to men whose skin was any shade of "white."

When the Chinese came the matter took a different turn. With the lines, "for ways that are dark and for tricks that are vain, the heathen Chinee is peculiar," Bret Harte summed up the miners' exasperation at the pigtailed hordes who persevered despite all that could be done to discourage them. Miners' meetings imposed special taxes on Chinese—unwarranted exactions which self-appointed tax collectors took delight in enforcing many times over. Others collected spur-of-the-moment individual "taxes" to get quick grubstakes or some ready spending money. The permissible size of mining claims was reduced markedly if a Chinese was the locator. The richness of each producing claim was carefully checked to ensure that no Chinese got one that was too good. In short, the Chinese were welcomed as cooks, gardeners, truck farmers, tailors, and laundrymen, but not as miners. They worked too hard and too long.

This "divine right" of the whites was so rigorously enforced, so successful in its main objectives, that when a miner undertook an apparently impossible task his companions would hoot at him:

"You haven't got a Chinaman's chance!"

—W. H. HUTCHINSON

PRAIRIE PUZZLER

By William Lewis, Jr.

Solution on page 130

ACROSS

1. Possess
4. Coffee
8. The "old man"
11. Stuff to skate on
14. Pancho's beans
16. Famous Oklahoma river
18. Confronts
19. Strum
21. Pairs of horses
22. More recent
24. Have chuck
25. Old _____ Fe Trail
26. Evil giant
27. Look over carefully
30. Outdoor shelter
32. Dryg__ch (ambush)
33. Long, easy stride
35. Test photos
37. Company (abbr.)
38. Confederate soldier
40. Custom
42. __whard (braggart)
43. Expression on discovery
44. What oil prevents
46. Communists
48. Rubbed out
50. Put up a scrap
52. Sections of a switchboard
54. Wrench
56. Treat as an outcast
58. Sharp blow
60. Gold (Spanish)
61. Reddish-yellow horse
63. Rye fungus
65. Veer sharply
67. California city (abbr.)
68. Emotion spread by Billy the Kid
70. Where dudes come from
72. Behold!

ACROSS

73. Gambling cubes
75. Identification sign
77. Deep black
79. Lassoed
81. Ventilate
82. Beat it!
84. Canned off the job
85. Fragrant rose oil
87. Species of iris
89. Traitor
91. Neckerchief
93. Desert rat's carrier
94. Female sheep
95. Hoof protector
96. Turf

DOWN

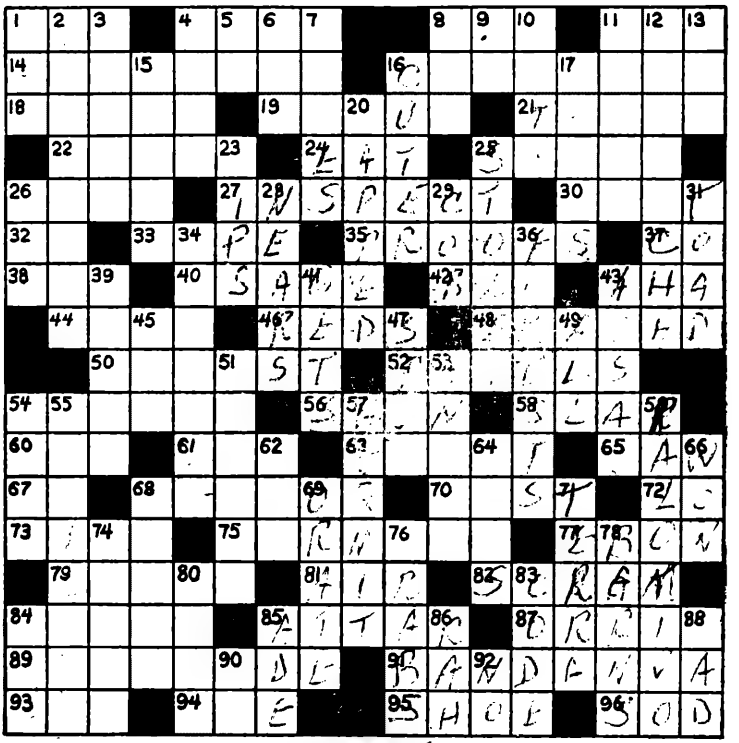
1. Not working
2. Horse tender
3. Better
4. Mexican name
5. Nickname
6. Horse doctor
7. Remains of a campfire
8. Not bright
9. Morning
10. Statistics
11. Hot under the collar
12. Southwest Indian tribe
13. Type measures
15. Gem
16. More attractive
17. Leases
20. Knocked
23. Tears
25. Rustled
26. Belonging to us
28. Approaches

DOWN

29. Corn on the _____
31. Leaping amphibian
34. Not indoors
36. Woods
39. Prospector's pack animal
41. Procures
43. Evaluate ore
45. Body of water
47. Rowel
49. Everyone
51. Hardened
53. Wrath
54. Marketed
55. Grasslands
57. Lone desert dweller
59. Cream-colored horse
62. "New Deal" measure

DOWN

64. Sturdy trees
66. Came out ahead
68. Plains Indian dwelling
69. Make "soap-box" speeches
71. _____ Firma
74. Calluses
76. Breed of horse
78. Outbuildings
80. Rim
83. System of signals
84. Monk's title
85. Fruit drink
86. Cheer
88. Down at the mouth
90. S___bones (the doc)
92. Word that keeps folks from getting hitched



SUNRISE ON THE CIMARRON

By
Harry Sinclair
Drago

Disaster Rides the Outlaw Trail

Curly, long rider apprentice, learns a vital lesson from Little Dick—and leaves a strangely contented man keeping vigil for one last sunrise.

Chapter One

Birds of Prey

IT WAS hot along the creek bottom, where the stillness was broken only by the jingling of bit chains and the creaking of leather as the tethered horses fought the flies.

In the shade of a drooping gum tree, five men, all armed, squatted around a dirty blanket, playing poker. A few feet away lounged another, a boy of eighteen, clean-looking and level-eyed, his attention fixed on the path that led up the bank.

Suddenly he roused himself and sat up stiffly, his ears cocked, as a red squirrel darted down the trail and scurried into the underbrush. In that moment of waiting his hand closed over his six-gun.

"Someone comin'," he warned, his lips tight.

The men dropped their cards and listened. A piece of brush snapped noisily, off to the right.

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"Only Dick, I guess," said one.

The others nodded, but their hands flashed to their guns as they waited tensely, their nerves worn ragged by long hours of hiding there in the creek bottom.

A moment later the strained look left their eyes and they relaxed as they recognized the hard-bitten face of the little, red-haired man who leaped from his saddle and strode briskly down the trail.

It was Little Dick, all right; the same Little Dick who had once ridden with the Daltons, later with the Doolin gang, and who, for over a year, had been running wild at the head of his own band of long riders.

"Well, I guess we're all set," he announced as he turned his horse over to the boy. "Better let him have a drink, Curly; he ain't warm at all. I took it easy comin' back."

"I guess you did," whined a tall, thin-faced man. His squinting, colorless eyes and drooping mustache gave him the meek, baffled look of a shiftless nester rather than one who had been outside the law for twenty years. He was Link Daggett, Little Dick's lieutenant. "Steve and me figgered you'd be back by noon."

"Ain't nuthin' gone wrong?" Steve inquired sharply.

Their anxiety annoyed Little Dick. "Nothin's gone wrong," he scolded sharply. "Didn't I tell you we were all set?"

No one took up the challenge in his tone, and as he rolled a cigarette he eyed each of them in turn—Steve Yeager, Tascosa Joe, Ike Sontag, Texas Jack, and Link—all good men and true with a price on their heads, dead or alive, who had proven their coolness under fire a score of times. As for Curly, the boy, he didn't figure importantly in Little Dick's present plans.

"I noticed the way you all went for your artillery just now," he went on, his voice milder. "Gettin' nervous, eh?"

"You damn right, Deeck, she's get plentay nervous waitin' here," Tascosa Joe, the half-breed, grumbled. "You been gone over eight hour. Eet's almost two o'clock now; eet don' take all that time to ride into town and back. Thees Curryville only five mile away, eh?"

"Come on, Joe," Ike Sontag whipped out. "Dick's got something to say."

Even in that company of hardened souls Ike was feared. Tascosa Joe glared back defiantly but held his tongue.

Ike turned to Little Dick.

"How does it look, Dick?"

"Pretty good. We're gettin' a break I didn't figger on at all."

They were all attention now, even the boy. Little Dick squatted gracefully on his toes, and the others gathered around him.

"There's a circus in town today," he said. "Drove in this mornin'. They put on a parade about noon. I waited till it was over. By one o'clock folks was startin' for the show grounds." He paused and looked around to see if they understood the significance of what he was saying.

Link and Texas Jack nodded weightily, Ike Sontag scratched his scarred chin.

"It means we're goin' to have clear sailin'," Little Dick grinned. "Wa'n't be nobody in our way, boys!"

"Certainly some break!"

It was the boy, Curly. The others looked up at him reprovingly, for he didn't rate an opinion as yet. Curly sensed the rebuke in their eyes.

"The kid's right," said Little Dick. "It makes our stand pretty easy."

"Yeh?" Tascosa Joe scoffed. "Eef you t'ink thees easy bus'ness you make beeg meestake, Deeck! We get plentay lead thrown at us before tonight."

Little Dick's faded blue eyes went cold as he fastened them on Tascosa.

"See here, Joe, I don't like your croakin'! If you've changed your mind about anythin' and want to walk out—there's your horse! Go now!"

Little Dick's tone left nothing open to argument. The half-breed flung himself to his feet, his face white with rage.

"What you mean walk out?" he sneered. "Tascosa Joe never walk out! But I'm no damn fool me. Thees Kansas not like the Territory. When we ride out of Curryville we got thirty mile to go—all out in the open. She's a long way!"

The boy did not bother to conceal his contempt for the man.

"You bet it's a long way; but it ain't any longer than I said it was," Little Dick rasped. "If we ride out of town a-smokin', and the chances are we will, we're goin' to have a runnin' fight 'till we're over the Kansas line. You all understood that."

"Course we did!" Link answered for the others. "Am I right, boys?"

There was muttered agreement.

"All right, I don' say nothing more," said Joe, seeing he stood alone. "But I sure got a fonny feeling 'bout thees bus'ness."

"It must be funny," Texas Jack grumbled. "We got good hosses, and that means a chance. This circus ain't a-gonna hurt that chance a bit. What's the play, Dick?"

Little Dick finished his cigarette before he spoke.

"Well, Tex, you and Link and the kid, here, will ride in first. If you have to make talk for anyone, let 'em think you're in town to see the circus. There's a hitchrack in back of the hotel, next door to the bank. You're all strangers; nobody's goin' to recognize you; so ride in right down the main street. You understand?"

Link repeated his instructions.

"You won't have your guns showin'," Little Dick warned. "Be sure of that. When you get to the hitchrack, stall around. We'll be right behind you. There won't be any conversation there, because we won't know you. Curly will stay with the horses. You'll have 'em ready, kid, from the moment we leave you. No matter what happens, you stay in the alley. You got that straight?"

"Sure, I got it," the boy replied. "I'll be ready."

"We'll use the alley to get out of town," the red-haired one ran on. "It may come in awful handy." He picked up a twig and drew a rough map in the sand at his feet. "Curly is in the alley, right here," he said, making a cross. "The rest of us start around the bank by the side street. Link, you go across the street. There's a grocery store right here."

Little Dick made another cross. "That's your stand. You can see the kid and keep an eye on the door of the bank from there. Just cover us, that's all. If we're lucky, you won't have to go for your gun at all. Right?"

Link nodded.

"Now you, Tex," Dick continued. "Drop behind us as we walk toward the bank. Stop at the corner." Dick made still another cross in the sand. "If anythin' goes wrong, Tex, fill your hand in a hurry, 'cause we'll sure be countin' on you to keep the way open

for us."

Texas Jack nodded and said nothing, even though he realized that Little Dick had given him the hot spot. In its way it was an honor, and he accepted it as such.

"Steve, you'll go past the bank to the hotel. You'll find some chairs on the porch. Sit down and keep your eyes peeled." Little Dick checked him off with a cross.

"That leaves Tascosa, Ike, and me," he said. "We'll go into the bank. It won't take us long—not over five minutes. Tascosa, you'll line 'em up. Ike and me will do the rest." He threw down the stick he had been using and straightened up. "Are we all set that far?"

No one had a question to ask.

"It's simple enough," he murmured thoughtfully. "If we get the cash without using our guns, we'll walk back to the horses. Steve will follow us. Tex will follow Steve. Link will be the last."

That was simple enough, too. Little Dick glanced at his watch. "We can be movin' now—any time!"

Five minutes later they led their horses out of the brush. Little Dick glanced sharply at the boy. Curly's face was pasty-looking and pinched with excitement.

"You all right, kid?" Dick asked softly.

The boy nodded jerkily. It was a new experience for him, marking still another step down the ladder.

"Sure, I'm all right," he murmured.

Foolishly he told himself he was ready for anything. Little Dick had fed him and been kind at a time when the rest of the world seemed to have turned its back on him forever, thanks to what was no more than a boyish mistake at worst. That alone had won a compelling sense of gratitude from Curly, for since early boyhood he had been fending for himself and taking the hard knocks of life with discouraging regularity.

Still, gratitude did not begin to explain his fondness for Little Dick half so much as the fact that under the calloused exterior of the man he had found a strange vein of understanding—something he had unconsciously been seeking for years.

If Little Dick was aware of it, he had never given any sign that he understood, and he gave no sign of it now.

"You want to keep your head up, Curly," he said. "Don't let your nerves get tangled. This thing will work out jest like anythin' else—"

"Don't worry about me," the boy interrupted defensively. "I'll be all right."

Little Dick nodded. "I'm countin' on you to be all right," he muttered.

Fifty yards from the road they stopped. Link, Texas Jack, and Curly edged forward. Little Dick spoke to Link.

"We'll be about half a mile behind you. Jest keep movin' right along. We'll walk into the bank about five minutes to three."

Link nodded and heeled his horse into the road. Tex and the boy followed. A cloud of dust enveloped them as they jogged away. Little Dick stared after them.

"We'll wait till they drop over the hill," he announced.

Tascosa Joe hung his Stetson on his saddle horn and began to run a comb through his black, oily hair. His hair was his one vanity.

"Thees Curly don' like thees bus'ness so much, eh?" he queried with an inso-

lent grin.

Little Dick measured him with his eyes. "What's wrong with the kid?" he snapped.

Tascosa shrugged his shoulders eloquently. "You saw hees face, eh? Eef sumt'ing goes wrong—*cuidado!* You watch out for those keed, Deeck!"

"Yeh?" Dick scoffed. "I'm not afraid of Curly. Better watch your own play, Joe. You seem to be droppin' apart."

That ended it; but as they waited, Little Dick's thoughts were of the boy. Only eighteen! He was young, sure enough. Maybe too young. Perhaps Tascosa was right. . . .

Little Dick's eyes narrowed as he communed with himself.

But, shucks! Why borrow trouble? he mused, throwing off his moodiness. *I reckon I can count on the kid. He'd do a lot for me.*

Chapter Two

To Rob a Bank

"WE SURE got to have a drink before we take in the show," Tex insisted loudly for the benefit of anyone within earshot. They were at the hitchrack in back of the hotel. "Better come along."

Curly said no. Tex and Link pretended to examine the cinch straps on their saddles. A moment or two later, Little Dick and the others rode up and dropped their bridle reins over the rack. There was no sign of recognition or word of greeting other than the impersonal "Howdy" of one rider to another.

Little Dick shot a glance at the boy. There was a reckless slant to Curly's mouth. He was sitting up stiffly in his saddle, his chin thrust out, teeth locked, and his eyes tense and determined.

It didn't alarm Dick, even though he sensed that the boy's nerves were tied into knots already. Maybe a word would pull him out of it. But instead of addressing Curly, he turned to Tascosa. Joe was regarding the boy, too. Dick slapped him on the back familiarly.

"When things get tough—you got to be tough with 'em, don't you?"

The boy heard and knew the words were for him. He saw Tascosa nod grimly.

"You bat! Eef some fellar loose hees guts—I take care of heem—personal!"

Curly's lips parted in a mirthless grin of contempt. He was only a kid, but he didn't take any backwash from a 'breed, he thought grimly.

Little Dick turned away reassured. Joe fell into step with him. The others had gone on. Presently the boy found himself alone. He saw Link walk across the side street to take up his stand in front of the grocery store. Maybe by watching Link he could get an idea of what was happening up in front. But even Link stepped out of sight. Evidently the horses stood too far down the rack.

Nothing to do but wait now—seven or eight minutes to go!

Curly glanced down the alley and recognized the usual things: refuse, broken crates in back of the stores, the kitchen of the hotel, a stray cat. Beside him the horses stood as though tied, tails swishing at the flies.

Without being conscious of it, he sighed heavily. Surely they had reached the corner by now. Dick and the others must be at the bank door. It certainly was tough having nothing to

do but wait. Better to be in the thick of it and know what was happening than to be sitting in an alley waiting for hell to break loose.

He listened intently. No sound reached him to say how things were going. Curryville was just a little deserted Kansas town, slumbering in the heat haze of an August afternoon. Now and then a cooler breath of air touched him as a vagrant breeze put a finger around the rear of the bank building. It brought to him the distant blaring of a band. The circus grounds were west of town. Well, it meant nothing to him; it couldn't mean anything.

He wondered how long Dick and the others had been gone now. It seemed a lifetime. They'd have to be back soon —maybe on the run—maybe throwing lead—

Curly ran a finger around the inside of his shirt collar. His fingers were cold and clammy. He rubbed his hand up and down his leg. Accidentally he touched his saddlebag. In it he had hidden his six-gun. He could feel it under the leather. It was just a hard bulge; but something electric ran through his fingers, and he didn't want to take his hand away.

The seconds dragged by as though they were hours. He wet his parched lips with his tongue. Why didn't they come?

With photographic detail he visualized every step of the grim business that engaged Little Dick and the others. He walked with them to the bank door; saw the startled look that leaped into the cashier's face; heard the terse commands that followed; saw Little Dick scooping the cash into the bag.

Danger really began for them right there, and it multiplied a hundredfold as they backed out of the bank. Someone was sure to see them. Maybe a dozen rifles had the door covered at that moment.

Perspiration began to run down Curly's upper lip in little salty rivulets. He had never fired at a man. He thought of that as his fingers closed over the hard bulge in his saddlebag. But he didn't want anything to happen to Little Dick.

It occurred to him that it would take time to get his gun out. Maybe it would stick in the bag. It would be handier inside his shirt. He looked around suspiciously before he unfastened the bag. With icy fingers he clutched the gun and stuck it into his shirt. Somehow he felt better, the metal cold against his skin.

"Gee, they oughta come now," he muttered. "They sure oughta be comin'!"

Unnoticed by him, a man drew back from one of the kitchen windows of the hotel, his eyes bulging with sudden understanding. He was only a dishwasher, a roustabout; but in his way he could put two and two together and find the answer.

He had been watching Curly for minutes. The boy's nervousness and air of desperation had first attracted his attention. Then, too, seven horses, all wearing strange brands, waiting in back of the bank, made him wonder. It had never happened before at that hour of the day.

Suspicion crystallized into grim certainty as he saw the boy stuff his gun into his shirt. In that country, honest men wore their guns on the hip for all to see.

Outlaws! The truth leaped at him full-fledged. With knees trembling he backed across the kitchen and began to run through the hotel.

CHAPTER THREE

Blazing Guns

AND still Curly waited. Another eternity dragged by. Suddenly the sharp crack of a rifle rang out! A second shot followed! Then a third! Another moment, and a dozen guns were barking.

The horses began to get panicky. Something snapped in the boy. The tension was over. He caught up the reins and held the horses ready, his gun covering the alley. He knew they were coming—coming with a vengeance now! A second or two and they'd be fanning it out of town.

He was wrong. Some of them would never leave Curryville. Tex and Steve were down already. Tascosa, with his premonition of disaster, was rolling in the dust, his eyes glassy and a mocking curse on his lips.

It had happened in a hurry. Little Dick and the others were backing out of the bank. Without warning a man ran out of the bakery on the opposite corner, a .30-.30 in his hands. Tex stopped him, but the next instant a steady stream of fire came from the hardware store across the street. It began to mow them down like weeds.

Link closed in, his two guns smoking. Ike and Little Dick were returning that withering shower of lead. Ike passed the moneybag to Dick and groaned, propping himself up against the building.

"Get goin'! Don't stall around like that!" he gasped.

Dick tried to get an arm around him. Ike pushed him away.

"It ain't no use," he cursed, firing again. "You and Link get movin'!"

Steve, Tascosa, Tex—all down; and Ike kicking out! No time for talk. No explanations.

One of Link's guns jammed. He threw it in the dirt. He and Little Dick were running for the horses.

It was down the alley, then, hoofs threshing. Even as they rode, Curly yanked the bridles off the unmounted horses and left them to shift for themselves; but they followed on, stirrups slapping furiously against their bellies.

All three knew they were riding for their lives. Link and Dick reloaded their guns.

They were at the end of the alley already. The main road had to be crossed. They flattened out, using their horses as a shield. Guns spoke. Link slumped forward, a trickle of blood widening rapidly as it ran down his neck.

Curryville was behind them suddenly. Ahead lay thirty miles of open prairie. They knew they would be pursued. A minute at the most and the pack would be after them.

Little Dick looked back, his fierce, red-rimmed eyes boring holes into the boy.

"They burn you, kid?" he demanded.

"Not a scratch!" the boy yelled back.

Little Dick didn't have to ask if Link had stopped a slug. "You bad hurt, Link?"

"I guess it's a keno this time," Link groaned.

They raced on. Curly kept his eyes on Link. He had never seen a man die before, and he knew Link was dying. He'd slip out of his saddle before long.

Their horses were tough, but the pace at which they rode began to tell on them. Five miles out of town they climbed a slight rise. They caught a

glimpse of a dust cloud moving rapidly toward them. They knew it was the posse.

"They're comin' fast!" Little Dick muttered as they urged their horses forward.

For the first time Curly noticed that Dick was wounded too. His saddle blanket was soaked with blood.

No one spoke. Each was busy with his own thoughts. Curly put his boyhood behind him forever. He knew if he survived that ride he'd never be caught outside the law again.

Little Dick's face was a ghastly hue beneath its stubble of red beard. His eyes were sunken and haggard-looking. Link held himself erect by clutching his saddle horn.

Their horses were covered with lather. Up and down! Up and down! Bare, rolling hills now. They seemed endless. But finally, far ahead, Curly caught his first glimpse of timbered slopes. It pulled him up. Once under cover they would have a chance!

Dick perked up, too. Link was beyond seeing. Ten minutes later he pitched face first into the road. Curly started to rein in. Little Dick shook his head.

"No use, kid; we can't do nothin' for him!" He looked back at the dust cloud that was the posse. He saw they were holding their own. "I'll be the next one," he declared grimly. "When I go down, you go on alone."

"Not a chance!" Curly ground out. "We see this through together!"

The trees were nearer now. Far behind them they heard a gun speak. Evidently Link had had enough left to slow up their pursuers momentarily. Little Dick heard and understood.

It was cooler. The sun was sinking to the west; but night, with its protecting mantle, was still hours away.

"I reckon we're over the line now," Dick exclaimed. "Our horses are about all in, though."

"So are theirs!" Curly called back. Hope had not flickered out in him.

Without warning, Little Dick's horse stumbled. Dick tried with all his strength to pull the animal up; but the horse had run his course.

"Get clear!" Curly screamed.

Dick tried to climb out of his saddle, but his right leg was like lead to the hip. The horse went down, pinning him to the ground. The big gelding shuddered convulsively as death came to it. Curly pulled Dick out from under it. Dick tried to push the boy away.

"You go on, kid! Don't worry about me—I can't make it!"

"We're going together!" the boy rasped fiercely. "Get that straight! We'll ride double as long as my horse will stand up."

Dick protested in vain as the boy lifted him to the horse's back. The moneybag was under Dick's mount.

"Let it go, kid! Every pound and second counts if you're goin' to have a chance!"

"I'm not thinkin' about myself!" Curly whipped out.

"I am!" said Dick. "I got you into this mess, and I'm aimin' only to get you out of it!"

By twilight they reached the Nottawa badlands. They left the road and took to the hills. Their horse moved only at a walk now.

"All of this for nothin'!" Dick muttered bitterly. "Think of it!"

They reached country that he knew. He was suffering untold agony.

"It'll be dark in ten minutes. You can go on afoot, then, kid. Come mornin', you'll be across the Cimarron and

back in the Strip."

Little Dick's voice was thick. Curly turned and stared at him anxiously. "I reckon we'll both be back in the Strip, come mornin'," he said.

Chapter Four

Hunted!

NIGHT had come and gone. Throughout the long, hot hours of the torrid afternoon, they lay hidden in the chaparral on a little knoll overlooking the valley of the Cimarron River.

Below them the tangled, junglelike brakes of the river bottom beckoned enticingly. But thanks to the telegraph, danger lurked there now. To a certainty, Bill Tilghman and his deputy U. S. marshals from Guthrie, man-hunters every one of them, had taken up their trail.

"How do you feel, old-timer?" the boy asked gravely, as Little Dick sat up and stared at the river, his eyes fogged with fever.

"Pretty tough," Dick muttered. He sank back on the blanket on which they had spread their guns and ammunition.

"I wish I could do somethin' for yuh," Curly groaned.

"You done enough already. You'd been safe across the river by daylight if you hadn't bothered to tote me on your back this far. You know that."

It was true enough. Once back in the wild, uninhabited Cherokee Strip, where the law of the six-gun was the only law, they would have little to fear.

"If we're lucky, we'll make it tonight." The boy's tone was unconsciously hopeless. He knew that without water Dick could not last much longer. It wasn't thirst so much as that gaping wound in Dick's hip that worried Curly. If it wasn't cared for soon, blood poisoning would end his score forever.

Directly below them, about halfway to the Cimarron, stood a sod shanty and the barns of a nester. They had been watching that house since dawn and were no longer suspicious of it. By now, they knew two men, an old woman, and a girl lived there.

A splash of green showed near the barns where a spring bubbled out of the ground. They could follow the course the water took as it ran off to the river, a thin, colorful thread against the tawny brown of the withered buffalo grass.

"I'm goin' down there and get some water!" Curly exclaimed with sudden determination.

Little Dick glared at him with a hint of his old authority. "No, you're not! You're not goin' to make any fool play like that!" He cast an eye at the sun. "It'll be evenin' in another two hours. I can stand it until then. Anythin' stirrin' along the river?"

"Not a thing!" the boy answered glumly. Little Dick saw him stiffen suddenly.

"What is it?" he whipped out apprehensively.

"The barn! They've hitched a team down there!"

The little man shaded his eyes with his hand and gazed intently at the clump of buildings. He saw a man drive a light wagon into the yard. Presently the other man came out and climbed in. They drove off at once.

Little Dick studied the wagon and

the two men for a minute or more.

"What do you make of it?" Curly asked sharply.

"Well, the wagon's loaded. Somethin' heavy under that tarp. You can tell by the way the springs is bowed. Looks like they was drivin' into town in the cool of the evenin'!"

Half an hour passed before the wagon finally dropped over a rise and was lost to sight.

"How long will they be gone?" Curly inquired.

"Ain't no town nearer than Sumner. That's about eleven miles."

"That's a break!" the boy exclaimed optimistically. "Nothin' to stop us from slippin' down to the house now and fixin' you up."

He started to get to his feet. Little Dick grabbed him and pulled him back.

"Don't you make a play like that again!" he growled angrily. "If old Chris Madsen or Tilghman are down there in the bottoms, they'd spot us before we'd gone fifty yards! You listen to me, Curly! As long as I got my boots on, you're takin' orders from me! You get that straight!"

The boy grinned mirthlessly as Little Dick bristled. "Don't tell me there's anything wrong with you, old-timer," he said.

"Well, I aim to ride herd on you until I hear the angels bangin' their harps," the little man answered soberly.

"Why talk like that, Dick?" Curly scolded. "We're goin' to fix you up this evening, slip across the river, and be on our way. You're not goin' to kick out! You're tougher than bullhide, you old hoss thief!"

Little Dick shook his head negatively as he communed with himself.

"You're wrong, kid," he muttered. "My whole side's paralyzed. It'll get my heart before mornin'." He saw the boy's eyes cloud. "Cheer up, Curly!" he insisted. "You don't hear me kickin'."

"I know it, old-timer; not a squawk out of you! Gee, if we'd only reached the river during the night!" His tone was bitter with self-reproach.

"Don't worry about that, kid," Dick told him. "It wa'n't your fault we didn't." He moistened his lips with his tongue as he sank back on the blanket.

The boy studied the brakes again. Nothing moved save a buzzard that sailed lazily overhead.

"He knows," Little Dick muttered as he watched the grisly thing. "No foolin' them."

The boy shuddered and cursed to himself.

Slowly the afternoon wore on. They spoke of many things, but always their talk came back to the fiasco in Curryville.

"And I'd studied that job for two weeks!" Little Dick sighed bitterly. "It certainly looked easy. I can't figger how we slipped up."

Neither surmised the truth.

"Someone talked," Curly grumbled.

Little Dick nodded thoughtfully. "Tascosa, I guess," he said. "I'd warned him, too. He always had a lot to say." Dick was silent for a moment. "Well, they're gone—and for nothin'!"

His voice trailed away to a whisper as he lay flat on his back, staring at the ever circling buzzard.

Conversation languished for a while. Little Dick roused himself at last and studied the river bottom once more.

"Shadders gettin' long in the brakes," he said. "We can be movin' in half an hour." He began to sweep

the ammunition into a pile. "When we –get across the river, Curly–we're partin'," he announced without meeting the boy's eyes.

"Not a chance!" Curly glowered.

"No one knows you was in this fracas," Little Dick went on, as though he had not heard the boy. "Jest keep your mouth shut and mosey along when you hit the Strip. Drift down into Texas or old Arizony. Understand?"

Curly refused to answer.

"I got about a thousand dollars in my belt. It'll be a stake for you; but you got to stay away from the wild bunch. I want you to promise me that, kid."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Curly answered gruffly, trying not to let him see he was touched.

"Why is it too late?" Little Dick demanded hotly. "You're only a kid! You ain't an outlaw yet! They ain't no reason on earth why you ever should be one! Bein' out of a job ain't no excuse for settin' out to take what you want at the heel of a six-gun."

The boy stared at him incredulously for a second or two. "You're preaching now, Dick," he taunted.

"I hope to tell you I am!" The red-haired one's tone left no doubt of his sincerity. "You seen what happens to outlaws. We all get it! Think of it–the Daltons wiped out, only one of the Doolin gang left, my bunch all gone!" He shook his head grimly. "No, sir, kid, you can't beat the law! If you don't stop a bullet, old Maledon will get you down in Fort Smith and tie a rope around your neck. It all gets to the same thing. Outlaw is only another name for a fool!"

Curly sat hunched over, staring at the house below.

"You listenin'?" Little Dick snapped.

"Yeh, I'm listenin'."

"Well, let it sink in, Curly. You're too fine a boy to run with the mavericks. Jest take in the slack a little and you'll get somewheres."

"And I'm to begin by walking out on you so I can save my own hide, eh?"

Little Dick patted his hand as the boy would have turned away in disgust.

"Don't you take on about that, kid," he urged. "Better roll the blanket; we'll be movin'. I reckon I can crawl as far as the house."

In the fading afterglow they made their way down the knoll. Long before they reached the buffalo grass at the bottom, Little Dick had to call a halt.

"It's too dark for anyone to see us from the river," Curly declared. "Climb up, old-timer; I'm going to carry you the rest of the way."

The spring was a hundred yards from the house. They sipped the water thirstily and bathed their faces. Little Dick felt better.

"No need to stop at the shack now," he said. "We can–"

"That's where we're stopping!" Curly cut him off. "I'm going to dress that hip, and I need hot water and bandages."

" 'Tain't no use," Dick argued, giving him a fierce look.

"I'm doing it, anyhow. Does an old woman and a girl scare you so tonight?"

It took them only a few minutes to reach the sod shanty.

"Better leave me out here," Little Dick suggested. "You get the lay of things, Curly. I'd only be in the way if anythin' went wrong."

"Nothing goin' to go wrong," the boy murmured stubbornly, but he saw the

wisdom of what Dick said.

"Don't knock; jest push the door open and walk in," the little man went on. "Keep your eye on that old woman; she may have a rifle handy."

With that the boy picked his way to the door. Hands on his guns, he kicked it open and stepped inside.

Chapter Five

The Cabin in the Clearing

THE only light in the room came from the blackjack logs blazing in the fireplace. It was a typical nester's shanty with its crude chairs, rough table, and earthen floor. The air was heavy with the appetizing smell of freshly made corn pone.

Curly sniffed it hungrily as he searched out the shadows. It was a moment before he saw a girl standing in the doorway that led to the back room.

"What do you want?" she demanded breathlessly, her bosom heaving with excitement as he stared at her.

Before he could answer, an old woman pushed past her and confronted him. She was a disheveled creature with scraggly hair and broken, tobacco-stained teeth. She glared at him with open hostility.

"Stranger," she screeched, "why be yuh bustin' in on honest God-fearin' folks like this?" Her voice had a thin, piercing whine.

"Don't be scared, ma'am; I don't mean you any harm," Curly declared quickly.

"Wal, what business you got here?"

"My pal had a little accident with a gun," he tried to explain, hoping to break down her antipathy with a smile. "He's outside. I want to get some hot water and bandages so I can fix him up."

The old woman shook her head. "We ain't got no clean rags, mister."

"I've got an old skirt that might do, Mother Lundy," the girl exclaimed. She had not yet taken her eyes off the boy.

"You shet up!" the old woman raged at her. "We're too pore to be doin' for strangers."

Curly saw the girl nod resignedly. She turned away, embarrassed.

"I aim to pay for what I get," he remarked acidly, his patience at an end. He tossed a ten-dollar gold piece on the table. "That ought to be enough to include a bite to eat."

Mother Lundy squinted her eyes at the coin. "How am I to know you ain't jest snoopin' round here for sunthin'? We never see no strangers."

"Snooping?" the boy echoed. "Why, have you got something to hide?"

The old woman knew she had made a slip, and she tried to dissemble her confusion.

"Nuthin' here wuth hidin', young feller," she cackled. "Whar's yore friend?"

Curly did not answer at once. He was gazing at the girl. The light from the rear room fell on her, touching her cheek and golden hair with a warm glow. The curve of her milk-white neck and rounded shoulder won a smothered gasp of admiration from him.

"What's your name?" he asked, a queer little catch in his voice.

The girl dropped her eyes shyly. "Myra," she murmured softly.

"Gee, you're pretty!" he exclaimed, hardly realizing that he was putting

his thought into words.

The old woman gave a snort of disgust. "Pritty and no sense to go with it!" she snapped. "You git that skirt, Myra, and fetch a basin of water. Go on!" She addressed herself to Curly. "Where be this friend of yourn?"

"I'll bring him," Curly declared.

He carried Little Dick into the room and placed him in a chair before the fire. The old woman scrutinized him narrowly.

"Sorry to put you out like this, Mother," he said. He realized at a glance she was a Missouri hill woman. He had known a thousand like her in his time —ignorant, but shrewd and suspicious of everything new and strange.

"How come you got hurt?" she demanded bluntly.

"My rifle went off," Dick explained. "Trigger must have caught in somethin'."

Mother Lundy let it go at that; but she wasn't convinced. Myra had brought in the basin of warm water and the white skirt. She and Curly tore it into strips.

"That's fine!" he said as they finished. "I guess I can start in."

"I'll help yuh," Mother Lundy offered. She wanted to see for herself that the little man was really wounded and not just shamming. "You fetch a lamp, Myra!"

The girl went to the kitchen to get it. Curly saw her stop to glance in a broken piece of mirror fastened to the kitchen wall and tuck a strand of hair into place.

"Better keep her out there until we get through," he suggested. "I'll go get the lamp."

Myra smiled wistfully at him as he entered the little kitchen. She had never seen anyone quite like him.

"I want you to stay out here awhile," he said.

"But maybe I could help," she protested.

"I'll manage." He had a little round mirror in his vest pocket. He brought it out and handed it to her. "Would you like to have this?" he asked simply.

"Purty, ain't it?" she murmured, giving him a rare smile.

"Well, it's yours." Curly's blood tingled as their hands touched. "Must be lonesome here for you and your folks."

Myra shook her head sadly. "I haven't any folks," he was surprised to hear her say. "I'm bound out to the Lundys. I've been here three years." She whispered the words almost fearfully.

"Gee! Is that right?" Curly exclaimed. For some reason the girl got to him in a way he could not understand. "You—you like it here?" he asked abruptly.

Myra shook her head again.

"Come on with thet lamp!" Mother Lundy yelled from the next room. "What all be you two talkin' about?"

"I'm coming!" Curly called back sullenly.

He placed the light on the floor beside Little Dick and proceeded to slit the trousers with his knife. When the old woman saw the black, matted blood, she was convinced he was seriously wounded. But when she looked for powder burns and found none, she knew he had lied to her.

Her old eyes narrowed as fresh suspicion gripped her. She was experienced enough in such things to know the wound was at least a day old and that gangrene had already set it. The fact they were afoot in a land where horses were cheap did not escape her.

She stole a glance at Curly as he dressed the hip. His manner of speech was enough to tell her he was an outsider. Outsiders in that country were either outlaws or revenue men. It was the latter she feared.

Curly got to his feet, his face pale. He had done all he could for Little Dick. "Feel any better?" he asked solicitously.

"Nothin' goin' to help that," the red-haired man groaned. His eyes met Mother Lundy's. "Mother, ain't you got a drop of likker in the house?" he begged.

The old woman stiffened at the word. "Nary a drop!" she protested indignantly. "I can't abide hit!" She started for the kitchen without more ado. "I'll shake up a bite to eat so you folks can be on yore way."

"We're certainly welcome here, eh?" Curly laughed contemptuously.

"The old woman's got somethin' on her mind," Dick warned. "I got a feelin' we ought to be movin'."

"Why?" Curly asked lightly. "We need food!"

"You'll have lots of time to eat later on. I got a terrible hunch they's somethin' wrong here." He eyed the windows and door suspiciously.

They heard Mother Lundy returning.

"You talk to her," Curly whispered hurriedly. "I'll slip out to the kitchen and see if the girl will tell me anythin'."

Myra was frying bacon. Curly sat down and watched her for a while. There was a sweet sadness in her smile that awakened a tremendous interest in him. She was the true pioneer type—strong-limbed, deep-chested—and Curly, who had always felt a great impatience with life, found something strengthening in her very placidity.

"Hungry?" she asked lightly.

"Just about starved," he laughed.

Myra turned the bacon.

"Where are the menfolks?"

She glanced at him shrewdly, wondering what lay behind his question. His frank, boyish eyes seemed to reassure her.

"Jest down the road a ways," she murmured, lowering her voice. "Don't tell Mother I told you."

"She wouldn't like it, eh?"

"Mother's afraid of strangers. The old man and Zeb won't let her take anyone in. Zeb would nigh kill me if he knew I was talking to you."

"Zeb—that's the old woman's son, I suppose," Curly remarked with a shade of annoyance. "He's a bad hombre, eh?"

"He's a devil when he's drinking. Makes it purty unpleasant for me." He saw her wince at some old memory. "Well, I guess you can eat now," she went on. "Everythin's ready."

He pictured to himself the sort of life she led there—a drudge to a family of nesters, harassed and abused by the old woman, stalked relentlessly by the son. The thought made his blood boil. He brought his chair down angrily.

"Myra," he exclaimed eloquently as he caught her arm, "this isn't any place for you. Why don't you go away?"

"What?" she gasped incredulously. In her excitement she almost dropped the platter of bacon. "Run away, you mean?" She shook her head hopelessly. "No; wouldn't be any use. Zeb would have me brought back."

"I don't mean go alone. I was thinkin' that when we—"

Curly stopped short, the utter absurdity of what he was about to suggest striking him and rubbing the

words from his lips. Myra raised her face, her eyes large and wondrous.

"What were you thinking?" she whispered softly.

Curly smiled as he tried to keep his head. "Nothin'," he murmured unhappily. "I guess we'd better eat."

He followed Myra into the other room. Little Dick was staring at the embers in the fireplace. The old woman stood by the window, looking down the valley. The moon was just beginning to rise.

"Here's food, Dick!" the boy exclaimed with an attempt at a laugh.

Myra set the platters on the table. Mother Lundy brought the tea kettle over. "'Tain't much," she grumbled, "but hit's the best we got."

"It's plenty," Curly told her. To his surprise, she picked up the lamp and carried it to the window. Little Dick snapped erect.

"Get the lamp away from there!" he barked impatiently.

The old woman whirled on him in fury. "This is my house; I'll do as I please about the lamp! What harm's hit doin' there, anyhow?"

"I don't know," Little Dick rasped. "It might be a signal to somebody. Get it away!"

Mother Lundy hesitated defiantly.

"You heard what he said," Curly ordered. "Put it here on the table!"

The boy ate heartily as the old woman sulked in the corner. He tried unsuccessfully to force a mouthful of food on Little Dick. Myra had gone back to the kitchen.

"Nothin' left but the plate," he announced a few minutes later. He looked up to find Little Dick staring anxiously at Mother Lundy. The woman was listening intently, her thin old body rigid, her eyes alert.

"Dick! What is it?" he demanded breathlessly.

"Fill your hand, kid! Quick! There's somebody outside!"

Chapter Six

Trails Divide

CURLY leaped away from the table. He had taken only a step when the door was flung open violently. Two men leaped in with a rush that carried them halfway across the room, their rifles covering Little Dick and himself.

The older of the two, his beady, rat-like eyes flaming, drew down on Dick. The other, his cruel mouth twisted into a repellent gash of hatred, went for the boy.

Curly surmised instantly they were the Lundys. As he and Zeb faced each other for a split fraction of a second, Curly heard a rush behind them. The next moment Myra had flung herself in between them.

"Don't shoot, Zeb!" she cried hysterically. "Don't shoot!"

The big fellow reached out to grab the girl and throw her out of the way; at that moment, old man Lundy fired at Little Dick. The red-haired one's gun blazed back, the two shots coming so close together they sounded as one.

The old man slumped forward on his face, dead before he hit the floor. Dick crumpled up in his chair. Zeb Lundy flashed a glance at his father.

"Daid!" he cried.

With a revengeful snarl he turned back to Curly. That glance was his undoing, for the boy fired from the hip, and Zeb's rifle clattered against the

table as it fell from his numbed hands.

"Now, back away and stick up your hands!" the boy ground out. The old woman was on her knees beside the dead man. "You get back, too!" he ordered. He couldn't see Myra. "Where are you, Myra?" he cried without turning.

"Here by the door," she answered.

"Pick up their guns and pitch them outside," he commanded as he herded the others into a corner. He waited until she had done as he said. "Now bolt the door!" He lowered his gun then. "One crooked move out of either of you and I'll bust you!" he warned the Lundys. "You keep an eye on them, Myra."

He knelt down beside Little Dick. "Where'd he get you, Dick?" he exclaimed anxiously.

"Stomach. Jest a mite sooner and I'd have got him first. I knew they was goin' to be killin' here the minute I clapped eyes on 'em."

"Better let me take a look at it," Curly urged.

Dick waved him away. "No, sir! I'll last a lot longer if I don't move. Jest reach under my shirt and unfasten my money belt."

Curly held back.

"Do as I tell you!" he stormed. "Let me kick out playin' boss, can't you?"

"Have it your way," Curly muttered glumly.

"There, that's it!" Dick sighed as the boy took the belt. "Jest put the money in your pocket with my best wishes, kid." He saw the boy's chin quiver. "Come on, buck up! Everythin's goin' to be all right."

"Don't say that," the boy protested. He glared at the dead man. "Gee, it's tough to be snuffed out by a dirty, good-for-nothing weasel like that, after what you've been through!"

He got to his feet and faced the old woman and her son. "You miserable rats were out for the reward money, eh? Do you think you're goin' to get it?"

The dreadful whine that crept into Curly's voice made even the old woman cower. Half-crazy, he crept up on them a step at a time. Zeb's eyes began to bulge.

"Come on, open up!" Curly cried, ramming his .45 into the big fellow's belly. "You wanta talk fast!"

"Mister, we don't know nuthin' about no reward!" Mother Lundy whined. "We thought you wuz after us!"

"That's right!" Zeb agreed. "We thought you wuz revenue men. We saw the lamp in the winder. Ma wuz to put it thar if anyone came—" He broke off abruptly, unable to go on as he read the thought in the boy's eyes.

"I told you," Little Dick murmured resignedly. "They got a still here. I knew there was somethin' queer about it."

Curly could only shake his head, unable to reconcile himself to the bitter irony of what had happened. He laughed then—a blood-curdling sound.

"Thought you was a revenue man, Dick! Ain't that rich?" He whirled furiously on Zeb again. "You know who he is now, don't yuh?"

The big fellow nodded. "Little Dick!" he gasped. The words seemed to stick in his throat.

"Yeh, Little Dick! Cut down by a litter of dirty, sneaking hounds that you couldn't have dragged within a mile of the place if they'd ever suspected he was here! I ought to finish the rest of you!"

He was utterly besides himself. Zeb

Lundy fell back as though he expected to be shot down in his tracks.

"Let 'em go!" Little Dick counseled. "It's time for you to be on your way, kid. Better be ramblin'."

Curly knew he was right as usual; it was time for him to be moving. With a grunt of contempt he turned away from the Lundys. Myra was watching him, her heart in her eyes. He saw her and gazed at her deeply for a moment.

"Myra, come here," he said to her. The girl glanced fearfully at Zeb before she obeyed. "You don't have to be afraid of him any more," he assured her.

Myra's face was white, but she smiled at him wanly. "I'm not afraid now."

Little Dick was watching them intently, his grizzled face less forbidding than the boy had ever seen it.

"You like me, Myra?" Curly asked simply. Her smile was answer enough. "I like you, too," he went on. "I can't brag about myself any; I've been running pretty wild. But Dick, here, is staking me to a fresh start."

He paused as if hunting words to say what he wished. "Maybe—maybe you and I could make it together, Myra."

Her heart skipped a beat. "You mean you're askin' me to go with you?" she cried, emotion choking her.

"She can't go nowheres!" Zeb shouted. "She's bound out to us for two y'ars yit!"

"I know she's bound out to you skunks!" Curly cried as he whirled on him. "But if she says she'll go with me, she's going!"

"They ain't no question about that," Little Dick announced grimly. The turn things had taken seemed to please him.

"Well, what do you say, Myra?" Curly asked.

"I'll go," she answered bravely.

"And a fine end you'll come to. packin' off with outlaws!" Mother Lundy jeered.

Curly silenced her with a glance. "Get your things," he told Myra.

"I haven't got much," she replied, pretty in her embarrassment.

"Whatever it is, put it in a bundle, and we'll go."

She had a little cubbyhole off the kitchen that she called her room. She ran to it at once.

Curly turned to the old woman. "What do you want to do with that?" he asked, pointing to the figure on the floor.

"Don't you tech him!" she screamed. She cursed him violently. "We'll take care of our own!"

"That's your privilege," Curly informed her. "Suppose you pick him up, Zeb, and carry him into the bedroom."

"Look out he don't grab a gun on you," Little Dick warned.

To guard against anything like that, Curly followed the big man out of the room.

Myra was waiting when he returned. Curly went over to Little Dick. He didn't know how to say good-by. The red-haired man stuck out his hand, sensing what the boy was suffering.

"So long, Curly," he said easily. "I know the two of you are going to make it."

The boy grabbed his hand. "I'm going to try, Dick," he replied, his voice throaty and hoarse.

"Better borrow their team here. I reckon you'll find it down the valley a ways. You can leave it in Sumner. You'll find a preacher there, too, kid."

"But I'm heading for the river and the Strip."

"No, not now! Forget all that! Nobody connects you with me. When you're stopped and asked your business, tell 'em you're goin' in to get married. But get out of Sumner by noon. The Santa Fé has a train through about one, that'll take you where you want to go." He nudged Curly with his elbow, and lowering his voice said, "Be good to her, kid!"

The boy knew he had to go at once or not at all. "I hate to leave you, Dick!" His eyes were wet and his voice faltered so he could hardly go on. "You're getting all the worst of it."

"Forget it! Everythin's jake with me. Jest pull off my boots, kid, and prop me up a little so I can see the river. It'll be daylight before I cash in. It's goin' to be nice sittin' here watchin' the sun come up over the Cimarron. Don't worry about me at all."

Curly went without looking back.

From where Dick sat he could see Myra and Curly going down the valley. The boy had his arm around her waist.

"So long!" he called feebly. He turned to the old woman. "They make a great pair, Mother! I'm kinda proud of 'em."

THE END

BOWIE'S BLADE

A BLADE of extremely fine temper, single-edged except for a fraction of its length near the point, with cross guard at hilt and a soft metal fighting-guard along its dull edge—such was the famous Bowie knife. It achieved international fame as a weapon in a day when firearms were not as dependable as they are now.

The knife took its name from James Bowie, Georgia-born Texan. Whether or not he actually designed the foot-long blade, which some have questioned, he certainly was the first to use one. The knife was made for him by a cutler in Tennessee who was reputed to have discovered a secret tempering process, producing a blade rivaling the almost legendary Damascus.

The Bowie knife soon became as important a part of a frontiersman's equipment as a gun. The men who won the West valued it because it was quiet, reliable, and deadly. It became the weapon of the gentleman and the muleskinner, the legislator and the outlaw. In the larger cities there were formal schools of knife-fighting, where gentlemen learned this specialized art of self-defense. A good knife fight was a contest of skill. The knife was held underhand, the favored thrust being the upward sweep at the belly. To wield a blade a foot long demanded quickness of hand and eye, plus no little practice.

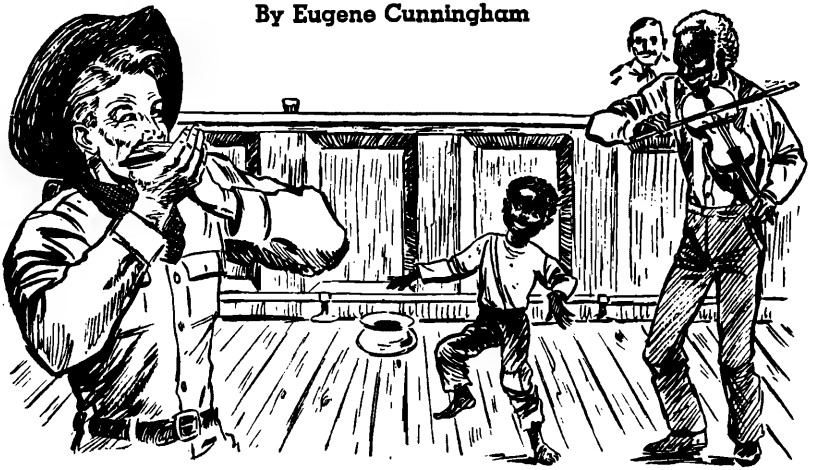
As years passed, Americans acquired a certain fearful contempt for the knife, no doubt because of its deadly history. A popular belief has been fostered that this product of a Tennessee ironsmith was a weapon used chiefly by Mexicans and renegade Americans. As a result, its important role in frontier history has been minimized.

—BOB BEAUGRAND

An ebullient redheaded ranger almost, but not quite, forgets his own birthday. Happily, he is reminded in time. All in all, it's quite a celebration.

Bar-Nothing's Happy Birthday

By Eugene Cunningham



SIX dingy wall tents among the giant cottonwoods at Bloody made the camp of Captain Hewey's ranger company. Down the sandy slope a quarter mile to the south, the rangers could see the wide ribbon of silver that was the shallow Rio Grande. They could watch—and cover with their Winchesters—Bloody Ford. It was by this crossing that Garcia, *El Bufalo*, might be expected to come into Texas.

"Bar-Nothing Red" Ames, sprawling comfortably in the shade of a tent with three companions, was staring down at the river from beneath the wide rim of his Boss Stetson.

"Reckon the Buffalo really aims to come see us?" he drawled, without looking at the other rangers. "Here we are, imitating a bunch of old Dominecker setting hens, all because the Buffalo sent word to the folks in Pease City that he's coming and he's coming a-smoking. Seems to me if the hairpin's coming at all, he oughtn't to put it off like this. He ought to fog up like a decent scound'l so's we could bury him and hightail it for a damper climate."

"You don't mean damper; you mean wetter, you hollow-laigged sponge," Step-and-a-Half Carstairs corrected him, grinning. "But we have been hunkered here longer'n X Company gen'ally decorates one spot. We come in on the fourth and here it is the

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twenty-sixth, today."

Bar-Nothing came up with a snaky wriggle to stand staring.

"Twenty-sixth!" he yelled. "Step-and-a-Half, you wouldn't fool a man, now? But, now I come to think of it, you don't own brains enough to make up a lie—"

"Of course it's the twenty-sixth," Step-and-a-Half told him with dignity. "I just pass over kind of contemptuous your remarks about my brains. Everybody knows it ain't that I can't lie with the best of 'em. It's just I got high religious principles against lying to jugheads that wouldn't know enough to cut out a lie from a whole herd of truth."

But Bar-Nothing was gone, moving as rapidly as the rocking of high heels permitted in the sand toward that tent where Captain Hewey, big, dark, quiet, headquartered.

"By Gemini!" Bar-Nothing said amazedly to himself. "If I didn't come inside a short inch of missing her. First time I ever forgot since I can remember; since I was just a button cowboy. I— Ah, hell! Cap'n's got company."

For out of Captain Hewey's tent voices carried to him. He moved up to hunker beside the canvas wall and wait the commander's leisure. Through the open flap he saw a big, tousled youngster in stained and shabby overalls and ancient boots, twisting a battered black Stetson in his two hands as he faced Captain Hewey.

"And so," the boy was saying, "now I come to be twenty year old, I guess it's time to make my throw at getting into the Rangers like I always wanted to all my life."

"Ah!" said Hewey in his deep, smooth voice. "Ah!"

Bar-Nothing shifted position until he could also see his commander, a big, immaculate figure in blue silk shirt, gray wool trousers, and polished tan boots of alligator hide.

"I—don't know," Hewey drawled. "I'm just afraid— What have you been doing lately? Is that—can that be—calf dip that I smell on you? Surely not!"

"Why—yes, sir," the boy admitted nervously. "I been working with the calves all week. Dipping 'em, you know."

"Working!" Hewey cried. His tone held amazement, alarm—disgust. "Did I hear you say working? Just how long has that been going on? When did you begin this—what was that word?—working?"

"Ever since I was big enough to spin a loop in my twine and haze a calf, I reckon. I—I really am a hard worker, too!"

"My son," Hewey told him sadly, "I am very much afraid that all your dreams of becoming a Texas Ranger have been destroyed by one word—work. Automatically, you're disqualified. Rangers, my boy, never work! No ranger would even think of it. You—why, probably you've so hardened yourself in the awful habit that you couldn't break it. So—"

"But I sling the Mex' lingo like I was a chili-picker myself," the cowboy protested plaintively. "And I heard 'em say, over at Pease City, you needed to enlist a man could spiel it."

"Too, there are other qualifications to be considered. Let's see— Suppose you had to lay out a man with your Colt. Would you strike him with the butt or the barrel?"

"With the barrel! Pa taught me that. You know he was in the Rangers with you thirty year back. He always says:

Hold onto the cutter handle and slam 'em with the barrel. Because you might have to shoot the *batardo* after all!"

"Right!" Hewey nodded solemnly. "If you were lone-wolfing it on the trail of five desperate outlaws, wanted dead or alive, how would you bring them into camp?"

"Well, if orders said 'dead or alive' I'd just bushwhack 'em and load 'em onto their horses," the boy said simply. "Pa always says: They pack better, dead!"

"Right! Now, where do you live these days?"

"Up the road a whoop and a holler; on the Box A between this and Pease City. Ten mile up, I reckon."

"Well, I think we can enlist you, if you'll promise faithfully not to work any more. Sit down over there while I talk to the gentleman here."

Bar-Nothing's sandy brows lifted. Could Captain Hewey be referring to him? He half-rose, but an irritable voice in the tent, coming from someone invisible to him, checked the motion.

"Well, if you got done monkeying with Sim Cook, Cap'n, I would appreciate you taking my complaint about my blaze-faced sorrel being stole."

"Certainly," Hewey agreed. "When did you miss it?"

"Two days ago. I got word that it was tied to the hitchrack in Pease City the day after it was stole. Some of that sticky-loop gang of old Jay Bird Pease, they done the stealing. That damn rustling old sidewinder! There he sets, saying he's the town and the town's him; he ain't only the justice of the peace, he's everything else in Pease. If I take my foot in my hand and fog it into town, trying to get back my horse, Jay Bird'll just wink at somebody and a gun'll go off accidental. Then Jay Bird'll prop my carcass up and try me for disturbing the peace and contempt of court and fine me whatever I got in my pockets and my horse and saddle too."

"As bad as that?" Hewey drawled, black eyes twinkling.

"Likely, worse!" the robbed one cried. "So I can't go and the sheriff, he won't go! I talked to him yesterday and he's sorry as hell he's got anyhow six months' work ahead before he can take on any new complaints. That sorrel's worth three hundred of any man's money. I want him back!"

"We'll certainly have to look into this," Hewey said thoughtfully. "Bar-Nothing! Something you want?"

"Oh, nothing much," Bar-Nothing answered. He got up and loafed into the tent. "It's just my birthday, Cap'n. I thought I'd like to drift over to Pease —it's just a short twenty mile—and buy myself a birthday present. Lifetime habit of mine."

"Oh!" Hewey grunted. "You know, Red, we're supposed to be here because of Buffalo? That's why I've kept you wild buckaroos out of Pease."

"Yeh, of course. But, Cap'n! Birthdays make a lot of difference. Take me, now: If I hadn't started out with a birthday—right in the very beginning! —I couldn't be here with you watching for the Buffalo!"

"All right, then," Hewey surrendered. "You can go to Pease. But you're due back not later than nine tomorrow morning. You heard what Mr. Hawley said about his sorrel horse? Well, bring it back with you. Bring the thief, too, if you run into him. Take Sim Cook, here, with you. It will be experience for him. But, remember! Don't you get organized and start a riot. From what

I've heard, Pease is quite–a–salty–community. You go in like a lamb, Red."

"I don't mind a bit going in like a lamb," Bar-Nothing said gravely, "if I don't go out like a light. From what I heard Mr. Hawley say, if I recover that horse of his, some kind of riot is mightily apt to start itself. You want me just to lie down under it?"

"That would be a lot to ask of a redheaded man," Hewey said with the flicker of a smile. "Particularly when that redhead is known from the Panhandle to the Big Bend as 'Bar-Nothing' Ames. What I mean is, don't you look for any trouble."

"Now I think of it, I never had to!" Bar-Nothing drawled.

It was a clean, extremely neat Sim Cook who rode out from the Box A with Bar-Nothing. He had scrubbed himself in the horse trough and put on new black Stetson, new blue flannel shirt, new waist overalls. His half-boots, his Colt and holster belt, the .44 Winchester carbine beneath his leg in saddle scabbard, even the stamped swellfork hull and one-ear bridle, were also brand-new.

"You see, I been saving up and getting things ready for my coming into the Rangers," he explained shyly to Bar-Nothing. "I certainly am glad Cap' Hewey took me! But he had me boogering for a spell, hurrahing me from behind that solemnous face."

He rode with admiring eyes upon Bar-Nothing's easy, efficient figure. For the name of this tall, swaggering, happy-go-lucky redhead was known from border to border of Texas–and fairly well in adjoining states–as one of the deadliest two-gun rangers in the Frontier Battalion and as a puzzle buster, a criminal catcher, towering in the very front rank.

"So this Jay Bird Pease, he's the lil' tin curly wolf with red stripedy legs," Bar-Nothing grunted, as they saw before them the "wide place in the road" which was Pease "City," with its lean rows of gray adobe and grayer frame buildings making "Main Street's" twin borders.

"He is that!" Sim Cook assured him earnestly. "He's been here since there wasn't nothing a-tall on this flat. He claims when he got here there wasn't ary mountain yonder–he planted 'em! Railroad coming by made the place and made him. Yes–sir! He rods Pease City from A to Big Casino. He's Big Auger."

"Railroad helped? How-come? I wouldn't guess Pease'd have a canary-bird pack of stuff to ship out. Most of the ranches front on the West Spur and load out over there."

"It's the passengers," Sim explained, grinning. "Train stops ten minutes. Passengers look out and see Jay Bird's sign: *Cold Beer and Justice of the Peace.* They come a-racking it. Jay Bird, he reaches down and pulls out some bottled beer out of the wet sand under the bar. He slams it and his six-shooter on the bar. Beer ain't cold, but it's damp. Colt's staring right at the customers. Nobody's kicked yet about warm beer. Passenger gives Jay Bird maybe a ten-dollar bill.

"Well, Jay Bird's Mex' kid runs out with the bill, hunting change. Passenger waits. Mex' boy don't show up. Train whistles–*toot-toot!* Still no Mex' boy; no change. (Jay Bird, he just can't figure how-come!) Conductor yells–*all aboard!* No Mex' boy showing. (Jay Bird's awful sorry.) Engine bell's a-ringing–*whangety-clang!* No Mex' boy yet. (Jay Bird do'no' what

to do.) But that passenger, he has got to run so's not to miss his train. So he hightails, talking non-Sunday School lingo. Minute the train's down the track, out comes the Mex' boy from under the porch where he's been smoking cigarettes. He hands over the five—or ten, or even twenty, to Jay Bird."

"Dear me, Suz!" Bar-Nothing cried, as they fox-trotted up Main Street toward Jay Bird Pease's thirst-and-justice headquarters. "That's not altogether downright honest, Sim. Maybe we can look into it. Well—no sorrel at this hitchrack."

"One across the road, yonder," Sim contributed, shifting in the saddle. "But he ain't got a white hair on him and Hawley, he said his horse was blaze-faced and had four stockings."

Bar-Nothing's first glance at Jay Bird Pease gave him instant and complete dislike for the squat, wizened old man. Jay Bird had whitish hair, the few straggling locks of it looking as if they had been stuck sparingly at random on his shiny, egg-shaped skull. His eyebrows were of a mustard-tinted gray and so shaggy that they almost hid the tiny, shifting reddish-black eyes. His nose was like a buzzard's beak overhanging a huge, loose-lipped mouth in which showed a scattering half dozen of yellow fangs.

"*Buenas dias!*" he cried as Bar-Nothing *clink-clumped* in with Sim Cook at his elbow. "*Como 'sta?*"

"*Muy bien*—very well," Bar-Nothing grunted. "*Muy bien.*"

Then he turned with artistic expression of bewilderment: "Thought you said it was a white man, Sim—kind of—"

Malevolent rage twisted Jay Bird's face. One hand disappeared from the bar. The tiny black eyes glittered like a sidewinder's. But Bar-Nothing, standing with air of blandest innocence, had both thumbs hooked in crossed shell belts.

"Smart Aleck, huh?" Jay Bird snarled. "Well, you better *sabe* this, right now: I'm Pease! I'm the town and the town's me! Folks that look for grief around here—they locate it!"

Bar-Nothing leaned over the bar until his face was hardly more than a foot from Jay Bird's.

"I have got just two questions to ask," he drawled. "First, what the hell are you talking about? Second, what the hell do I care? My name's Ames. I'm a ranger sergeant. Out of Hewey's X Company that's camped at Bloody Ford. I sing palpitating tenor when I sing, but I howl a lot better than I sing. I go where I'm a mind to go and I stay until I'm plumb ready to rattle my hocks. I ask for what I want, then see that I get it. AND RIGHT NOW I WANT A DRINK!"

Jay Bird jumped at that sudden, unprefaced bellow. For there was a blaze in Bar-Nothing's blue eyes that failed to match the grin stretching his wide mouth.

"A' right! A' right!" he growled. "No call to be a-bellowing around here like that. You can have your drink. Nobody aims to keep you drouthed up. But I don't like folks making remarks."

"Oh, me neither!" Bar-Nothing assured him. "Makes me fit to tie—and I never found the man, or men, could tie me."

He put a silver dollar on the bar, but stared at Jay Bird.

"Li'l' words have come floating to me, about the way you make your prices skip up and down, all-same the giddy gazellaroo. Now, me, I just don't like such. But I never massacreed a

barkeep yet for charging me two bits a throw."

"Two bits is all right," Jay Bird told him sullenly—but with a furtive stare at the door behind the rangers. As if he expected—or hoped for—some relief from that direction, Bar-Nothing thought.

"Here's looking at you, Simmy," he said, when two tin cups of whisky were before them. "Look at her while she's red—"

"Can't," the boy disagreed, rolling a narrowed eye at Jay Bird. "Can't look at the liquor, account I got to keep looking at that door. Couple of good friends of Jay Bird's—couldn't you smell 'em; li'l' bit stronger'n a skunk? —they've been peeking in, trying to make out what Jay Bird means by all his funny motionings and eyebrow wigglings."

"I've been eyeing 'em, too, in that old mirror back there. Wouldn't it just be too sad, if something they tried to pull got poor old Jay Bird killed dead? Down her and take another."

They drank formally and Bar-Nothing refilled the cups, grinning cheerfully at the furious Jay Bird.

"Gullup that'n' and we'll ramble out where the air's fresh. I like to celebrate my new birthdays where things smell clean— Oh, Jay Bird! What'd you and the rest of your petty-larceny thieves do with Mr. Hawley's sorrel horse, huh?"

"Never knowed Hawley owned a sorrel," Jay Bird snarled, choosing to ignore the bulk of the question. "Did he?"

"Says he did. Kind of sorrelish animal with a mane and—oh, yes, a tail!— and a leg sticking down toward the ground from each corner. Critter lived off grass and corn and hay and stuff like that. What'd you say you did with him?"

"I said I never knowed Hawley owned a sorrel!" the baited Jay Bird yelled. "And you looky here, young fellow! I'm Justice of the Peace. Ranger or no ranger, you run no sandy around here, onto me!"

"You-all put him—where?" Bar-Nothing inquired, scowling. "I didn't just make out what place you said. Well, ne' mind! Ne' mind! I'll stumble onto him—always do. Then you'll be sorry, Mister Jay Bird, your tail in a crack and all!"

"Better watch you don't stub your toe trying," Jay Bird mumbled, as they turned toward the door. Bar-Nothing laughed.

"Any more juice-joints?" he asked Sim Cook. "I don't love to throw all my tremendous-tremens trade to one place, specially not a dump like Pease's. What-for a community is this, anyhow, that'll suck up its redeye over a bar like that? Why, you'd think it'd sour on their stomachs! Me, I like to be happy and don't-give-a-hoot, allsame li'l' bitsy bluebird. You never catch me off in a mourning corner sucking a bottle of nothing. *Nunca! Jamás!* Never! I'm a sweet soul natural."

Approached, now, a citizen of the place who seemed to have suffered that souring of the stomach he had mentioned. It was a very tall man, six and a third feet in height. And he could not have weighed thirty pounds over the hundred. His dark hatchet face was marked by V-lines from hooked nose to savage gash-thin mouth. He stalked down the dirt sidewalk squarely in their path, gaunt arms swinging, one huge hand slap-slapping his pistol holster, glowering ferociously.

"Her pay-rents don't like me,
They say I'm too pore,
They say I'm unworthy
To enter her door.
They say I drink whisky—
Well, my money's my own
And them that don't like me
Can leave me alone!"

Bar-Nothing's tanned face was boyishly happy as he moved forward, his chin a trifle lifted, his head swaying gently in time with *Jack of Diamonds.* So he and the tall man met toe-to-toe and stopped short.

"Where the hell you think you might be going?" the townsman demanded. "Think you can hog the road in Pease, huh? Well—"

"Well?" Bar-Nothing repeated softly. "Flea bite you, or something? Family troubles, maybe? Old lady won't let you sleep in the house account of your Peasey smell? Or—could it be just growing pains, you not having your weight yet?"

The tall man made a wordless, rasping sound and flicked his hand to low-swung Colt. Sim Cook jerked out his new Colt with all the speed he could manage. But Bar-Nothing's hands twitched like nothing in the world so much as striking snake heads. He slapped the tall man on one cheek with the right-hand gun barrel, on the other with the left-hand Colt. His victim seemed to forget that he had begun to draw. He staggered backward with an agonized grunt, both hands up with palms out. A deft blow across the temple dropped him.

"Hey! You redhead!" a squat man yelled from across the street. "Cut that out! Don't you hit Casselberry no more!"

He came panting over to them. Bar-Nothing spun his Colts on the trigger guards. The butts slapped into his palms; twirled again so that they stared at the star wearer—as he stared.

"I'm city marshal," the stocky man blustered. "You can't—"

"You can't—" Bar-Nothing repeated softly. "Seems to me that's the pet saying around this gawdforsaken village. And—know what's funny? I have been doing it, whatever it is, all the time! Now, my good advice to you is, ram that cutter back into the scabbard and quit trying to howl like a wolf! Good idea to file off the front sight of the hogleg, too: because if a gunfighter comes along and takes it away from you and rams it down your neck, you won't get scarred up so much!

"I'm a sergeant in the rangers. This folding contraption on the ground come interfering with me in the execution of my doings. According to the statutes made and provided, I discussed that interfering with him in the way and the fashion I figured his intellects would understand best. Perfectly simple!"

"Casselberry interfered? How-come? Execution of what?"

"Celebrating my twenty-seventh birthday! And don't you think for one minute that's not a serious doing! Come on, Sim. We are turning over the prisoner to the city authorities. Now that he understands what's what, he's going to save—a—heap—of—trouble."

They went on, leaving behind them a silent marshal—pistol reholstered—bending over the unconscious Casselberry.

At the far end of the town was an ancient and bullet-pocked 'dobe house with the customary "gallery" along its street-front. A dingy tin sign bearing

a faint likeness of a billygoat hinted of beer inside. They entered, to face a brown, still-faced man with sun-squinted gray eyes. He looked flashingly at Sim, then watched Bar-Nothing steadily.

"Hi, Pegleg!" Sim greeted the saloonkeeper. "Touch paws with Bar-Nothing Red Ames of the rangers. I'm a ranger, too, since today. Red, this-here's Pegleg Scott. He'll do!"

"Howdy," Pegleg drawled, relaxing. "I been watching out for some of that coyote crew of Jay Bird's. They went racking past last night and shot some more nicks into my wall. But when they scallyhooted back to try it over, me and Bill Jameson the blacksmith and Squeaky Conner the freighter, we happened to be all out at the end of the c'ral a-cleaning our Winchesters —except me, being I al'ays favor a Sharps .50 buffalo gun.

"It made us so skittery when they got to howling that our long guns went off accidental-like and we come close to rubbing some of 'em out. Happened some of us did kind of buttonhole Hog-nose Judd, that trifling swamper at Jay Bird's wagon yard. Plumb killed the horse he was forking. Kind of sad, how it happened."

"They—bother you any, after?" Bar-Nothing asked owlishly.

"Not as I recollect, no. Of course, that nitwit marshal did come this way a li'l piece yelling some kind of foolishness about me surrendering to the law up at Jay Bird's. He was yelling in English, too. He speaks tol'able Mex'. Most of Jay Bird's thieves do. Handy for 'em. Lets 'em lie in two languages. But I couldn't just make out what he wanted. So I went around the Widow Jenk's c'ral to hear better and I motioned him to come closer. He must've mistooken my intendings because he singlefooted right away from there. Maybe I was waving at him with the hand I had my Sharps rifle in. What'll it be?"

"Beer and—who plays that fiddle? It's my birthday, Mr. Scott. So I just pine for happiness."

"I'll call Old Black Joe. He's asleep out back. Got a pickaninny, too, can double-shuffle and buck-and-wing."

At his yell an ancient Negro appeared, grinning, to get the battered fiddle from the wall. He sawed the bow across the strings and swept into *Sugar in the Gourd.* A tiny black boy stole in, teeth splitting his face with a white crescent. His twinkling pink heels slapped a tattoo on the rough floor. Bar-Nothing fished a harmonica from his pocket and joined in.

Then, suddenly, a rapid rattle of shots carried to them, followed by a raucous, high-pitched howl. Bar-Nothing jerked the harmonica from his mouth and swore irritably as he moved to the door and looked out.

In front of Jay Bird Pease's saloon a man was reloading his pistol, howling wolfishly the while. His hand jerked and again the Colt was emptied in air.

"I wish he wouldn't do that," Bar-Nothing said plaintively. "It plumb sends the shivers down my spine—that howl."

He went quickly along Main Street. Sim Cook trailed him, tight-faced, hand on Colt. The howling one was pulling more shells from his belt when Bar-Nothing stopped before him.

"What's the idea of these vulgar noises?" Bar-Nothing demanded coldly. "Are you just trying to bother people?"

"When I feel like howling—" the cel-

ebrant thrust stubbled, liquor-swollen face out belligerently "—howling's what I do!"

To Sim Cook was presented a sort of dust-wreathed Punch and Judy show accompanied by sounds as of applauding hands. It continued for only a minute or so, then Bar-Nothing stepped back with a sigh and the ex-howler began slowly to get to his feet.

There were faces at every opening of Jay Bird's place. Bar-Nothing, seeing everything, stepped quickly in and twisted the man's right hand behind him. Holding that wrist and the left arm, he hustled him into Jay Bird's door.

"Pease!" he called grimly. "You've been bragging about being a justice. A' right! I'm not only a ranger, I'm a man with an ear for music. On both counts I give this two-legged tomcat into your custody for disturbing the peace. I certainly expect you to take charge of his case!"

"'*Sta bueno*," Jay Bird mumbled, without meeting Bar-Nothing's glare. "I—I'll take him in charge."

"Better see that you do," Bar-Nothing advised him.

Back in Pegleg Scott's place, he waved at the fiddler.

"Now, let her rip!" he cried. "I'm not in right good practice, Joe. You get so far ahead of me that I need spec's to make out what you're playing. Let's try *Going Up Cripple Creek!*"

Again the bow sawed frantically and Bar-Nothing, setting down his beer glass, wiped his mouth and lifted the harmonica.

"*Oooeeee! Yip! Yip! Yip!*" came to them from downstreet.

"Coyote's out again," Pegleg said gravely. "Believe I'd tie a knot in his tail this time, Red—a hard knot. But—that gang's likely ribbed up something, this trip. You could easy slide up behind this row of buildings and—whisper in his ear—"

"Can happen!" Bar-Nothing agreed, grinning one-sidedly.

A quick, barehead glance from the front door showed heads in Jay Bird's windows, figures in his doorway. Then, trailed again by the faithful Sim, he ran awkwardly down the room and through Pegleg's back entrance. They trotted up the rear walls of this row until at the corner of a store neighboring Jay Bird's 'dobe—but separated by a space of two yards—they could look at the howling figure in the street.

"Ah, he ain't coming, Harrigan!" someone in Jay Bird's yelled. "Yellow's up in his neck. Heave some lead in the air!"

Bar-Nothing turned to look at the half-dozen horses standing "hitched to the ground" behind the saloon. He crossed to them, looking at the ropes on the saddles. With quick, tight grin he took down a coil of slim rawhide *riata* and shook out a loop. Sim grinned, also, as Bar-Nothing came back to him.

"Now, I'll show you I used to be a right tol'able buckaroo before my health gave out and I had to quit work and go to rangering," Bar-Nothing grunted. "This is a California string; sixty-footer. Just what Doc' Ames would've ordered. A Texas thirty-two-foot manila wouldn't reach our Howling Harrigan, but—"

He went quietly along Jay Bird's side wall to stop at the corner. The loop went up and out snakily, settled around Harrigan's neck, and tightened. With a ferocious Comanche yell Bar-Nothing hauled in the slack hand-over-hand. Harrigan was dragged to

him and he stooped to loosen the choking noose. He jerked the strangling man up, half pushed, half carried him out to Jay Bird's door.

"Back you go, you mangy *fices!*" he snarled at the audience. "I wouldn't trust one of your cur-faces behind me!"

He had one Colt out and sullenly they surged into the saloon before its muzzle—and Sim Cook's.

"Now, you Jay Bird!" Bar-Nothing snapped at Pease. "You listen to me prophesy and you listen good and hard: I'm tired of this pet sack of wind of yours and if I hear anything louder'n a Number Two whisper out of him, there's going to be more trouble around this skunk den than your clothes 'll stand. You *heah* me? I'm telling you in the solemnest tone I've got to lock him up until he's sober or plumb out of howls. You *heah* me?"

"I—I'll take care of him," Jay Bird promised, with downward glance, longing glance, at something behind the bar, but without moving either dirty hand out of Bar-Nothing's sight.

Once more they returned to Pegleg Scott's. But this time they had hardly passed through the door when Harrigan popped into the street. He had a pistol in each hand, Sim reported—Bar-Nothing had gone quietly on to the bar and motioned twice, once at the beer, again at the sawed-off shotgun hanging conveniently in Pegleg's rear. Six shots sounded, then a howl.

"He's keeping one loaded," Sim called. "Rammed her in his bellyband; loading the other one. You certainly got to get out from under your hat to his stubborn gall!"

Bar-Nothing drank his beer deliberately and bought one for Black Joe. Then he accepted the shotgun from the still-faced Pegleg and made a second departure through the back door. This time he and Sim ran through the litter of tin cans and bottles behind the buildings until they could cross Main Street at that end of town farthest from Jay Bird's. They came back in the rear of the buildings on that side, crossed again while the men in and around Pease's looked toward Pegleg's place, or watched that corner from which Bar-Nothing had roped Harrigan.

They slipped soundlessly into Pease's rear door and the crowd at the front had no warning of their presence until Bar-Nothing clicked back both shotgun hammers and yelled savagely:

"Yup! Yup! Grab your ears or grab a harp! Over to the wall, all of you polecats; my patience has come unraveled. If t'wasn't I promised Cap'n Hewey I'd be tender as a barbecued calf today, I swear I'd take you nine at a time and I'd sweep this county clean with you. Sim! Dab a loop on that laughing jackass, huh?"

"Looky here!" Jay Bird yelled shakily. "I'm justice and—"

Bar-Nothing let the shotgun slide to the crook of his left arm. His right hand flashed down; came up with a Colt. The slug jangled a pyramid of tin cups on the bar at Jay Bird's very elbow. The old man made a squeaking noise and jumped two yards to the side, hands uplifted.

"Was a man, once," Bar-Nothing remarked casually, "got himself a lot in Boot Hill, talking when he ought've been listening. What's it, Sim?"

Sim, at the front door, steadied his new Colt against the frame. He let the hammer drop and, blending with the bellow of it, a yell, half-startled,

half-pained, came from Harrigan. Sim moved outside, pistol easily at hip level.

"Just wondered could I shoot it out of his fist," he called back. "Come on, Harrigan. Singing-school's done shut up. We have got language to pour into your long, dirty ears."

"Which is your goat?" Bar-Nothing demanded, when Harrigan came meekly inside, shaking his bleeding gun hand.

"Big black out behind," Harrigan mumbled. "I—I never meant no harm, Sergeant. I—it was just the whisky. I'll hightail!"

"You bet you'll hightail—right out to camp with us. Come along. Jay Bird—and all the rest of you—if there's anything happening as we rack out of this, Pease City's going to look like a Kansas twister hit her. Only way you can stop us is to down us, both. If that was to happen, Cap'n Hewey and the boys'd certainly enjoy piling up the carcasses of everybody that Sim and me left for 'em. Cap'l likely have a word or two to say to you, anyhow, time he hears what kind of justice you are."

While Sim prodded Harrigan ahead of him through the back door, Bar-Nothing watched with ready shotgun. Then he backed out and saw Harrigan climb into the saddle of the tall black.

"Why, that's the hull I took the California twine off of," he told Sim. "Bring our horses around, will you? I'll wait."

When Sim reappeared with their mounts, they swung up and jogged quietly toward the road. Pease City was sullenly quiet behind them. But within a mile they met the city marshal, riding out of a pasture. He gaped at them.

"What's all this?" he blustered. "You rangers needn't to think you can take a man out of town without seeing me first—"

"Take that gun out—slow!" Bar-Nothing commanded, gesturing with Pegleg's shotgun. "Get it, Sim. Now, my homely friend, just turn around and side us. I sort of want to hear what Cap'n Hewey will have to say to you. It'll be as good as reading a big, thick book, for you. It'll be a talk on how to live a lot longer'n you figure to last, way you've been heading. Come on!"

So, with the silent prisoners leading, they went toward Bloody Ford at the long, mile-eating hard trot. The sun was sliding toward the western horizon; the air grew noticeably cooler. It was nearly sunset when they came to the tents of X Company.

"What's this, Red?" Cap'n Hewey inquired from his door. "Prisoners? Did you recover Mr. Hawley's horse?"

With the question and sight of Hawley behind the captain, Bar-Nothing made a vague, self-reproachful sound.

"Blamed if I never forgot all about that bronc in the augering! We looked the place over and he wasn't in sight and then that skunk Jay Bird set this coyote to howling and—"

"That's my horse!" Hawley bellowed, surging out. "They colored up his nose and his stockings and hairbranded him, but I raised him from a colt and I'd know him in a million in the dark. And—and you, Ed Welch! You was riding him!"

With which he hauled the city marshal from the saddle and fell to committing assault, battery, and minor mayhem upon him. Bar-Nothing swung down and separated them—

after a time.

"This, Harrigan," he told Captain Hewey, "he was disturbing the peace and every time I'd arrest him Jay Bird'd turn him loose and give him another drink and start him out again. So I packed him out here. I do think you'd enjoy talking to Jay Bird and Welch about the way they handle the law in Pease."

"I'll talk to Jay Bird, all right," Hewey said ominously. "As for Welch, we'll hold him on a charge of horse theft. As for Harrigan—" he looked long and thoughtfully at the silent, glaring prisoner "—we'll keep him, too. Oh! Have a good time?"

"Worst birthday in my life! Them Peasers are half-skunk and half-coyote. Run a white man crazy."

From his hip pocket the captain drew a leather case. Out of it came a sheaf of folded papers. He riffled them, selected one and held it out to Bar-Nothing, whistling softly. Bar-Nothing unfolded the printed notice—and Harrigan's ugly likeness was there, under twin lines of heavy Gothic capitals—$1500 REWARD – MURDER – HIGHWAY ROBBERY—

"Happy birthday, Red," Captain Hewey drawled.

"Fif-teen hun-dred dollars!" Bar-Nothing breathed reverently. "Thanks, Cap'n! Thanks! She certainly is. She – She's a gen-u-ine P-cutter of a birthday!"

THE END

The Princess Lassoed the Pirate

By Harold Preece

Boston-bred Joe Chapman, roistering buccaneer, met Guadalupe Oretega, of Old California's aristocracy—and vaqueros gathering round their campfires still sing of their strange romance.

ONCE there was a princess who loved a pirate. It didn't happen in the movies, because there were none in God's good year of 1818. It all started in the Old West when the pirate drifted off his customary blue-sea range to meet the princess who was handy with charm and handy with a *caballo.*

California's Mexican vaqueros tell the story with their guitars around their campfires in the steep Sierra Madres. They say that a certain Boston doctor named Joseph Chapman committed piracy to keep from committing matrimony with a pale, passionless blue blood from Beacon Hill. Then the vaqueros credit Lupe Ortega, whose blood was both warm and blue, with finally making a man out of Big Joe Chapman the freebooter.

The tale always begins with the major depression in the plank-walking industry, 'way back when the Spanish king was losing his empire and his shirt in the New World. New times were hard times for pirates, what with the police ships of the just-born Latin American republics rounding up honest buccaneers to dance from the yardarm. That was where the Yankee ingenuity of Big Joe Chapman came in.

He saw that piracy offered no real future for an ambitious lad. But the long riders on shore were turning pretty pennies, since Old California lacked sheriffs and posses to hamper them.

Whereupon he whispered something into the cocked ear of his friend, Bouchard, one-time galley slave on the merchant vessels of France. That partnership of a Boston Brahmin and a Marseilles gutter rat was to have strange results. One outcome would be the only known attempt by sea wolves to turn themselves into brush poppers, à la Jesse James.

It must have been a comedown for them. But on a lazy morning in November, the buccaneers sacked and burned the little town of Monterey. They pulled down the imperial flag of Spain, and ran up the Jolly Roger over the smoking ruins. Then they spread out over the Santa Barbara Valley, pillaging the *ranchos* and eliminating any competition from local *banditti* by jovially slaughtering them.

"The gold is gone from Spanish waters with the Spanish ships," Big Joe murmured to Bouchard. "But there's treasure on these haciendas to sink a dozen galleons. And there's enough at the Ortega *rancho* to make any haul so far look like taking pennies from paupers."

Queer talk for an honor graduate of Harvard, though spoken with the Harvard accent that not even a pirate could lose!

Eleven days after the sack of Monterey, the buccaneers rode up on their stolen horses before the great estate that the princely Ortegas called *Rancho el Refugio.*

Their backsides were sore from the unaccustomed saddles. But their hearts were high when they found the big Moorish-type mansion, with its narrow balconies and wide patios, deserted. Or practically deserted. Two peons, left behind as caretakers, fell clutching their stomachs in the futile, devoted resistance of loyal servants.

Big Joe sized up the place. "Two hours for this job, mates," he said with brisk Yankee efficiency. "Stow in your bags all the gold and silver you find in the house."

He paused and gave them a wink that wasn't Bostonian. "And don't leave any wine or wenches hiding in the cellar from lads with a rare taste for both."

A great belly laugh went up from the freebooters. Big Joe led the army of jailbirds from a dozen nations that smashed the century-old carved doors with sharp sea axes.

But just a little later, he learned that it takes a Spanish don to outfox a sharp Yankee.

No pirates ever worked harder on land or sea. And none ever took in less pickings for their work.

Chests, pried open with four-foot crowbars, yielded not golden doubloons but musty bits of paper. Secret panels, behind priceless Seville tapestries tipped down with cutlasses, revealed a couple of scared termites but no pearls or rubies. No silver candlesticks stood tempting pirate hands on mantel or dining-table. Gaping holes in the chapel walls showed that the usual tiny golden crucifixes had been hastily removed. There were no signs of pretty Indian serving girls, who might be predisposed to pirates after long and kindly acquaintance with bush poppers.

Only one consolation could be lifted from the dreary fiasco. That was a dozen bottles of rare Canary wine. And they were lifted quick.

The pirates withdrew to the big yard and corks started popping. Big Joe calculated the costs, in labor and time, of this misadventure. Bouchard guz-

zled the fine wine and stared moodily at the Ortega palace. He had hated aristocrats and their magnificent quarters from the time he had made heads roll in the French Revolution.

"We must show our appreciation for the hospitality of M'sieu Ortega's fine wine," he said in a thick, fuzzy purr.

The Frenchman staggered to his horse. He reached in his saddlebag and pulled out one of the pine torches carried by all travelers in California. He lit it with sparks from a flint, then handed the flaming stick to Big Joe.

"It was M'sieu Chapman who directed us into this most idiotic of all ventures for men of our calling," he said to the band. "It is M'sieu Chapman who shall have the honor of burning the house of our absent host."

Big Joe started to say something. Then he saw that everything had been said. There were thirty-five pistols of thirty-five men cocked and pointed at him.

The torch was burning rapidly, but he moved slowly toward the mansion. This was a hateful job to crown all his years of free-handed raiding and roistering. Smashing the doors had been necessary, and they could be replaced. But wholesale and unnecessary destruction of property was something that cut deeply into his frugal New England soul.

He stopped short when he saw something shiny in the dust at his feet. Evidently something dropped by the Ortegas in their hurried flight. He bent down and picked it up.

It was a miniature of the loveliest girl whose features had ever been mirrored by art.

The blaze of the torch licked dangerously close to his left palm as he clutched the picture with his right. He gazed at the imperious high cheeks that showed a strain of far-off Moorish or, maybe, Indian blood. He feasted his eyes on the dark cascade of hair tumbling around the slim, high shoulders. Then he drew the picture to his lips. The kiss he gave it was of a kind he had never bestowed on pale Priscilla in Boston.

"Señorita, you are mine," he murmured.

Out of a far-off world sounded the mocking voices of the pirates.

"We send him to burn a house," Bouchard was saying. "And he moons over a shiny bauble picked up from the dust."

"Finish him off and let's get back to our brig," answered another. "And damme if I ever sail with another bloody Yank under the Jolly Roger."

A quick roar of shots intruded on his dream. One of them snapped the torch in his left hand squarely in two. He thought it was the pirates firing at him. Quickly, he ducked and dropped the miniature in his pocket. He wheeled with his own old-fashioned horse pistol drawn, determined to go down fighting.

Then his jaw dropped with his gun.

The yard was filling with armed horsemen. At their head rode a plump patrician grandee who must be Don Antonio Ortega. Ranged in a loose rank about him were six elegant young men in silk riding-breeches and embroidered vests tailored in Madrid. Behind them rode the usual horde of roughly dressed, half-wild, half-Indian vaqueros.

But to all these, Big Joe gave only fleeting attention. He was staring at the figure who sat mounted nearest the old man.

He was seeing her long-flowing man-

tilla of finely spun lace with its folds draping casually, proudly over her lavish side-saddle. He saw the anger on her lips when her white, firm teeth parted in a haughty glare at the pirates fleeing in a clumsy, disordered gallop. With bullets raining around him, his dazed blue eyes were gazing into her stormy black ones.

And she was looking at him curiously, penetratingly—at this blond barbarian whose breed cultured Castilians despised.

He heard one last distant shout from the retreating Bouchard:

"Run you fool, run! Run anywhere—but run!"

Tardily, his feet sought safety. He had gone but a few steps when something swished through the air and coiled about his shoulders. He felt himself being pulled like a fish on a line. It was his first experience with the uses of a lasso.

Then he was looking up into the face of the young dandy at the other end of the rope. The face showed wealth and caste but not mercy.

"Pirate scum!" the aristocrat hissed angrily from his saddle. "Death by dragging!"

"Death by dragging!" roared the vaqueros.

The girl spurred quickly to the youth's side. "He is not a coyote, but a man—" she began. Then the voice of the old patriarch cracked the tense air like thunder.

"Silence, Guadalupe!" Ortega shouted at his daughter. "Your fiancé, Don Carlos de Salazar, has spoken for us all—for me and for your five brothers. Dragging it shall be!"

The girl looked at her father and her betrothed in cold fury. "Then I shall not be here to give assent to cruelty." She touched her horse with her silver-mounted quirt and loped away.

The eyes of Big Joe trailed her as she rode off. Guadalupe—Lupe for short. So he knew from his own fluent Spanish. It was the first time he had heard her name—and it was probably the last.

For, coolly, Don Carlos was going about preparing one of the most brutal deaths ever conceived by Castilians, who were uncommonly versatile in such matters. The youth lengthened the lariat, tied its end to the saddle horn, then wheeled his horse so that the captive was behind the big Arab charger.

The captors dug their spurs in their mounts' flanks, and headed toward Mission Santa Ynez, ten miles away. There the Ortegas had taken refuge during the buccaneer invasion. For the first quarter of a mile, Big Joe managed to keep step with the mountainous Arab stallion pulling him along. But his thoughts kept gathering speed with the horses' hoofs, and they tore at his brain as spiny, vicious cactus tore at his legs.

To fall in love with a girl's picture—He touched the pocket where he'd stowed the miniature and made sure it was still there. To see the girl for one minute of his reckless, wasted life—then to be dragged toward death next minute by the man who claimed her. That was a destiny for which no precedent existed in the written records of the Brahmins or the unwritten ones of the buccaneers.

He felt a quick jerk at the rope. Don Carlos had turned in his saddle and was leering at his prisoner.

"Faster, faster, *Yanqui!*" he shouted. "You insult my horse."

The Castilian's spurs dug in the

charger's flesh till the blood ran red from its flanks. The horse made a great bound forward. Big Joe stumbled and fell over a rocky clump of prickly pear. A small boulder crashed against his temple. The thorns entered in his flesh like a thousand needles heated in the flames of hell. Then he was bumping along like a log trying frantically to set itself upright.

As he began losing consciousness, he saw the face of Lupe Ortega magnified a thousand times before him. He reached out a convulsive hand trying to grasp her. The hand collided with a yucca branch that ripped off his fingernails. Her face was a kaleidoscopic blur, endlessly revolving, when pain closed his eyes.

There he might have ended—Boston's black sheep whose name was now whispered, but never spoken, in the gloomy but proper manses of Beacon Hill. But who, ask today's vaqueros, can deny that love for a woman may keep lit some small spark of life in a man fated to die? Few men have been known to outlive hell's own ordeal of the drag. But Big Joe Chapman was one of them.

Even that is a minor miracle compared to the one which makes the brown riders of the Sierra Madres ashamed for their fathers who abetted torture. For what, say they, but love's sorcery could have kept Lupe Ortega's picture in Señor Jose's pocket with his clothing, like his flesh, battered to shreds from that ten-mile tribulation?

Quien sabe! Queer things that we shall not see the likes of happened in long-ago, far-off times. But when Joe's numbed hands twitched with life, as he lay sprawled in the mission courtyard, they reached instinctively for the pocket where lay the miniature picture of Lupe.

All else was gone: his pipe, his penknife, his purse with a thousand United States gold dollars, scattered along the trail for prowling Indians to find and appropriate. But consciousness came back slowly and achingly when they felt the hard, square object. He opened his eyes to see his tormentors ringed in a circle around him.

Don Carlos was fuming. "We've been digging your grave for the last hour," he spat. "We thought you were dead as a dog."

The mangled pulp that was Big Joe's face painfully managed what tried to be a grin.

"Takes more than that to kill a Yankee, señor," he wheezed.

He heard a girl's silvery laughter, and saw the Don Carlos's face turn livid with rage.

Big Joe turned his eyes, and realized that whatever triumph was due in this farrago belonged to him. For the repartee of a barbarian *Yanqui* was causing Lupe Ortega to laugh her betrothed to scorn.

His gaze met hers, and the laugh died on her lips. Her eyes widened with pity as she looked down at the bruised thing shaped like a man. And a fallen pirate without a ship or a centavo felt the healing pity of a woman.

She and the men drew back respectfully when a lean, cassocked figure approached. Padre Ullibarri, of Santa Ynez, stood looking down in grave surprise at the big man lying on the ground.

"It is the direct intervention of God," he said, crossing himself. "I was preparing for your funeral. What happened was a shame to men who call themselves Christians. Where do you

come from, my son?"

"Boston, sir," answered Big Joe.

"Boston," the priest mused, "a city of culture—"

Don Carlos broke in impatiently. "Do not trouble yourself with him, *padre mio*. We shall take him to Monterey where Governor Sola will have him shot as an example to pirates."

The priest looked troubled. "He has already suffered the agonies of a thousand condemned men," the padre said quietly. "And the Church would have excommunicated all of you had he died from your usurpation of the law."

Lupe Ortega sprang forward. Her small, firm hands grasped the billowy sleeve of the padre's robe.

"*Padrecito*," she exclaimed, "there is a greater law than the law of beasts who deal with a man as with a beast. It is the Church's law of sanctuary for the broken and hunted."

Her finger, that wore Don Carlos de Salazar's betrothal ring, pointed at Big Joe Chapman.

"I invoke the law of sanctuary for this man."

The priest's kindly, gray face relaxed. "Sanctuary granted," he said in a relieved voice. "I promise you, Don Carlos, that he will be delivered to the governor for execution if he misbehaves."

Padre Ullibarri was looking straight at Big Joe when he said it. And the prostrate buccaneer detected a wink in the composed, reverent eyes.

So began the third phase of the Boston prodigal's existence, this time as the ward of a church he had never called his own. Big Joe carried no rosaries in his pocket. But the picture of Lupe was always there for him to touch and see when he was safely alone.

Padre Ullibarri never troubled him about formal creeds or questions about his past. But when his bones mended, the forcibly retired pirate had more than enough tasks to do to pay for his keep.

Soon he became the right-hand man of Ullibarri, the gentle priest, as he had formerly been of Bouchard, the swashbuckling pirate. Working for priest or pirate, those New Englanders were bound to rise. Big Joe became the boss of the Indians laboring in the gardens and vineyards. That first year, no agricultural mission in California reported greater yields. He began making vocabularies of the tribal languages, and learned Padre Ullibarri was delighted to have a Boston scholar for company.

Big Joe was skilled with tools, as the mission Indians were not. He saw the shabby furniture in the padre's humble quarters, and replaced it with exquisitely tooled pieces. A carved likeness of an angel on a writing-desk bore something of a family resemblance to Lupe Ortega.

In fact, whatever he did reflected that woman who had saved his life by countering the laws of courts and firing squads with a law that was infinitely older and wiser.

The Yankee built a grist mill that was the wonder of California for its beauty and utility. Then he carved a model ship for the mill pond and named it the *Guadalupe*. "It's the prettiest name I know," he told the Indian women who used the pond for their family wash.

They and the good priest thought that he had named the boat for Mexico's patron saint—Our Lady of Guadalupe. But Big Joe's lady was mortal

and he never missed a Sunday attending the mission church to glimpse her sitting, closely guarded, with her family. Always, he bowed low to her. Always, so the vaqueros relate, she turned her face.

But always after those meetings, Lupe Ortega paced the floor of her boudoir at *Rancho el Refugio.* "I have fulfilled the obligation of charity to this man," she would tell herself. "I owe him nothing further."

But the *ranchero* caste wondered, as the months went by, why she kept postponing her marriage to Don Carlos. And Don Carlos was currently involved in troubles political as well as romantic.

Spain's last colony on the North American mainland was in the throes of revolt. That was Mexico, of which California was a part. Anxious to become a high official of a new nation, the young grandee formed a revolutionary junta in the province.

Once, Big Joe would have rejoiced to see the aristocrat's bullet-ridden corpse after the Spanish firing squad was done with it. Once, that same Castilian had proposed for him an identical fate. But, discreetly, the Yankee absented himself from the services when Don Carlos was buried from the Padre's church.

And the *rancheros* wondered why Lupe Ortega showed no more than formal grief over the death of her betrothed.

Then, suddenly, Big Joe found himself once more practicing the profession for which he had been trained. An epidemic broke out among the Indians and spread to every section of the population. California had neither drugs nor drugstores. But the Harvard doctor gathered wild herbs from the woods, and mixed medicines that stopped the plague.

Gratefully the Governor pardoned him for piracy, and the *Yanqui* was no longer a fugitive protected by the church. Now the door of every great *hacienda* in California stood open to *El Doctor* Chapman—every one, he felt, except the door of *Rancho el Refugio* that he had battered down with an ax. *Rancheros,* who had cursed his name when he strode through the province with a cutlass, blessed it now as he rode by with his pills and scalpel. Patriarchal grandees subtly suggested that he wed their daughters. But he fingered the miniature in his pocket, and knew silently that there was but one woman, forever unapproachable, for him.

San Gabriel Mission, south of Los Angeles, was one of the places where he made regular clinical check-ups. He looked up in surprise from tapping a papoose's chest that day when he saw Don Antonio Ortega, hat in hand, standing before him. The old man looked troubled, and tired from a long ride.

"It—it is my daughter, Señor Doctor," he stammered. "She has broken her arm— We have tried many things but it does not heal. If you can restore its use and appearance, I shall deed you half a league of my land."

El Señor Doctor shooed out the Indians. Then he faced the grandee squarely.

"I still owe you the price of a door, Don Antonio. There is no fee. Did your daughter send for me?"

The old man flinched. "No, señor. I merely told her that I would bring her the best surgeon in California. This will be a complete surprise."

Joe Chapman jumped in his saddle,

and the pair surpassed all records for a long-distance ride. The *Yanqui* noticed that the Ortega mansion had doors more resplendent than the first when he was shown to his patient's quarters.

The girl gave a muffled little cry when she saw the doctor. "I asked for a surgeon—not a pirate," she flung tartly at her father.

But the doctor was motioning Don Antonio out of the room. Grimly he told his soul to behave as he put on his best bedside manner. He examined the broken arm, steadying his hand against what it might reveal at the first touch of her.

"I'll have to break it again and reset it, señorita," he said. "It will hurt and you will hate me."

Joseph Chapman had never had more admiration for Guadalupe Ortega than he did at that minute. She clenched her teeth, while he went about the painful business. But not one cry came from her lips.

He straightened up to wipe his brow after the splints had been placed. He drew out the silk handkerchief that was a part of the handsome outfit in which he was now decked. Then that which has pleased the vaquero balladeers, for more than a century after, happened.

The miniature of Lupe slid from the handkerchief and dropped to the floor. The girl looked at it and then at Joe Chapman in startled surprise.

"Where did you get that?" she demanded.

The old hopeless look was on the doctor's face as he answered:

"While I was preparing to burn your house, señorita. And none shall take it from me—none but you."

The girl's stormy eyes softened. "I—I shall never take it from you, señor," she said.

A learned Yankee should then have known enough to do what any unlettered vaquero would have done. Instead, Joe Chapman stood there digging his boot in the floor like a New England schoolboy. Finally, he stuttered:

"Well, I guess—guess I'll have to be going. I don't suppose I'll ever see you again—unless you break the other arm."

He picked up his bag and prepared to leave. Then he heard Lupe's voice again, and it was biting scorn.

"You—you clumsy *Yanquis!*" she was saying. "You know more about a bear or a beaver than you do about a woman." She dropped her eyes. "Doesn't a good doctor attend his patient till she gets well?"

Only then did this doctor realize that his patient needed some post-operative attention.

Hours later, she spoke: "I could never marry a man who takes life. But I can marry one who saves life."

But would Don Antonio approve? "Your father—?" began Joe Chapman.

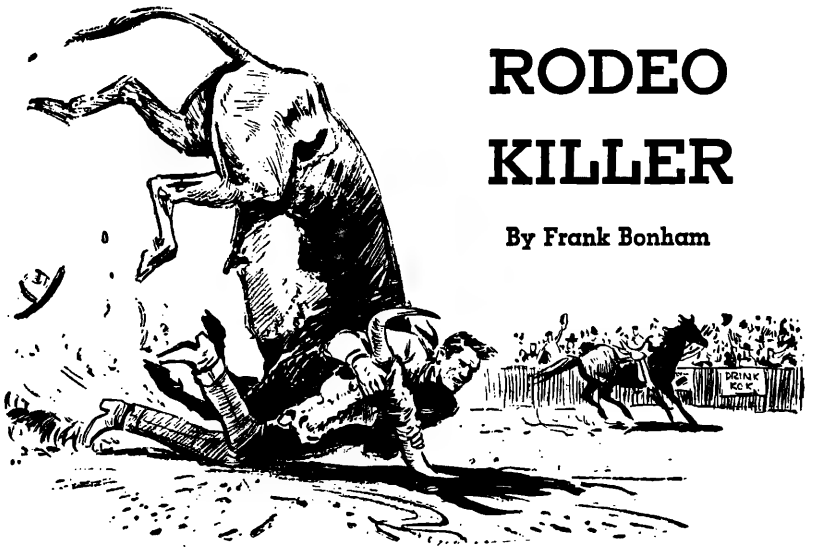
Don Antonio stepped in that minute to answer for himself. "I have often wondered, José," he said, rubbing his chin, "why you ignored us while calling on the other *rancheros*."

One thing else worried the New Englander with his healthy respect for property.

"Your door—" he began.

Don Antonio raised an impatient hand. "Carry your bride through the new one."

And that, swear the vaqueros, is exactly what the pirate did with the princess, as soon as her arm was well enough to wrap around him.



RODEO KILLER

By Frank Bonham

Little Sister, it's said, can't qualify for anything but the Stringhalt Handicap, but Cap'n Johnny swears otherwise. Hugh Talbot hopes for a near-miracle, and lovely Lass Towne keeps the faith.

Chapter One

Emptied Corrals

LASS was always the first one up around Snake-Track headquarters, rolling out of her blankets before sunup to be down in the pasture with Little Sister by the time the first golden flakes of dawn came sifting into Poverty Valley. So it was Lass whose cry emptied the bunkhouse of half-clad punchers that morning. Hugh Talbot was still buttoning his shirt when he came out the door, stockingless feet tromped into spurred boots, blond hair rumpled.

The empty corrals were bleak in the chill pre-dawn. All was peaceful, save where Lass, down by the water pen, was trying to saddle her pony. Hugh's eyes hunted the trouble.

Then it hit him solidly in the stomach. "Crawled out, the breechy sons!"

Mike Talbot, long-time ramrod of the Snake-Track, came out behind him, tucking in his shirt tail and swearing. Mike always knew, at the first alarm, what needed looking after when trouble hit the ranch.

He turned to confront the hands who had grouped behind him, still logy with too little sleep on top of too much work. "Will somebody quit batting his eyes and get the horses!" he snapped. "Yonder's the hold-up, belly-deep in grama! I'm telling you for sure, if them critters ain't back under the pole before Dennis gets here, they'll be some old faces gone out of the bunk-

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house tonight!"

Mike stumped down to the open gate, Hugh beside him. Two of the Snake-Track boys grabbed their bridles from the harness shed and went after the wrangling horses. Mike's jaw was set like cement. The beef buyer was due at seven o'clock, a man who insisted on his twelve-hour shrinkage, and the hold-up was spilled all down the creek!

Lass was mounting her pony when Mike reached the gate through which nearly three hundred prime beef animals had broken out during the night. She watched him examine the latch, a simple arrangement consisting of a horseshoe on a chain bolted to the gatepost. The open end of the shoe, dropped over a gate bar, made an absolute lock against range-seeking cattle.

"That's how I found it," she said. "Hanging just like that. The shoe isn't bent or the pole cut. The steers couldn't have pushed it open!"

"Reckon they got to jostling the gate," growled Mike.

"You mean you think they could have opened it?"

Hugh watched her, not missing the pinch of worry between her eyes. His wide mouth began to smile.

"Let's see—" He closed one eye and pondered. "Maybe we ought to think back and remember who was the last one in last night."

Lass Towne's tawny-gold eyes blazed. Her lips pressed tight; but it was Mike who grunted, "Yonder comes your dad! Why don't you skedaddle and get the critters drifting up thisaway?"

"All right." Lass's reply had a reluctance. She was still staring at Hugh, whose grin was broadening.

She had hardly left the corral when Mike grabbed the horseshoe latch again.

"By golly, look here!"

Hugh examined the shoe. The inside edge, through years of wear, had been honed like a knife. Now that edge was splattered with brown, dried blood!

"That ain't steer blood," he frowned. "Somebody unlocked that gate in a hurry or else somebody didn't savvy to yank the shoe off by the chain. But who in this outfit don't know about it?"

The yard gate banged, and they looked back to see Barney Towne standing by the harness shed. He stood there, short legs outspread, bald head swinging like that of an angry bull, blood-shot eyes sweeping the empty corral. It took him several scowling seconds to analyze the trouble. Then he let out a roar.

"Talbot! Where in tarnation are the cattle?"

Mike took a deep breath and went back to him. "Down by the creek. They busted out during the night."

Towne breathed heavily through distended nostrils. The flush of his red features, vein-shot by twenty years of tippling, deepened while he sought strong-backed words to carry the weight of his fury.

"Busted out, hell! Why don't you admit you forgot to close the gate?"

"Because I didn't," Mike replied doggedly. "Now, there's no use getting your blood hot! Mark Dennis ain't due for an hour. We'll have them back before then."

Towne's lips had a sour, sadistic twist. "Here's one to raise your own temperature on. If Dennis gets wise and docks me five percent for his damn twelve-hour shrinkage—you're done! I ain't hoorawing, Talbot! May-

be you figure you're the brains of this layout. But maybe you're going to find out who does the hiring and firing hereabouts, in case you've forgot!"

One of the wranglers brought up Barney Towne's horse. He swung up heavily and, not looking back, rode off. His fists knotted, Mike stared after him. Then he turned on his heel and went to saddle his pony.

Hugh held his temper until they were riding out of the yard. He rode with an easy slouch, but under the old jumper his body was stiff as whipstock. Then he said, his eyes bright with a hard shine, "He's asked for it once too often, Mike. We're getting out! To hell with this lousy iron! We can make a heap more money glory-holing like we used to, and not have to take his guff!"

Mike's quick glance was testy. "That's foolishness! Man's liable to say 'most anything when he's tapering off a six-day drunk."

"But when he's drunk five days out of seven you finally get your belly full. We've had ten years of it, and that's enough! You pulled the Snake-Track right out of bankrupt court when you first signed on, but Towne's kept it in the red ever since. Not that I haven't asked it a hundred times before, but what have we got to gain by staying?"

"Give him an inch, boy," Mike muttered. "If I was to quit him the iron'd go under in six months."

"We've given him miles already. If he drinks the Snake-Track onto the rocks, it isn't our fault. I've heard Towne get the credit for being a top-hand cowman too long. They say he can bring a weanling to prime on a handful of corn and a bucket of water. That he savvies rodeo stock better than any man in New Mexico. The whisky-logged cull! When they say those things they're talking about Mike Talbot! All Towne savvies is to pop a cork!"

Mike made no answer. Hugh knew that, as usual, he was getting nowhere. "At least," he grumbled, "you could have told him the truth about the gate —that Lass left it open!"

"We don't know that! You can forget about her being the last one in!" Mike's words crackled. Where Lass was concerned he was as fiercely protective as an old mother grizzly.

Hugh shrugged. His glance went off across the billowing, tree-dotted rangeland, the blue of far distances shining in his eyes.

"Remember Calico town, Mike?" he said, after a moment. "Deadwood, Leadville—Tombstone? We had fun, those days, glory-holing around wherever the sign was right. Scratching in played-out claims for bacon and beans. A little silver here, a little gold there—"

Mike's scowl did not mask the longing in his face for those unforgotten, carefree times. But he shook his head doggedly. "As far as I'm concerned, glory-holing's all a played-out claim. We had seven years of it, and we ended up as broke as we started!"

Just as broke, Hugh thought, but not half as happy. Tragedy had brought them together, and he considered it tragic, for Mike, that they had ever settled on the Snake-Track. The last ten years had tucked many a wrinkle into the tough skin of his face. Hugh had watched him grow heavier and solid in his joints, and his short, stiff hair turn iron-gray, had seen his vitally blue eyes fade and become tired.

He remembered the first day he saw Mike seventeen years ago, when they

dragged him out of a cave-in in a Deadwood gold mine, more dead than alive. His memory was one part of him that never did come alive after a stull timber had smashed against his skull. Nobody could identify him. He was new in town, one of a hundred muckers in the mine, most of whom were pulled out dead.

Hugh's father was one of these, leaving the eight-year-old boy orphaned. After Mike was on his feet again, he took pity on the half-starved kid who was making his grub watching miners' horses and wagons while they cavorted in the saloons.

"So you've got no daddy," Mike had said to him one day, when he was back at work. "Well, I'm just as bad off. I've got no name. The boys call me Mike, but I've got to have a longer handle than that to sign the pay sheet. Suppose we make a swap? I'll take your old man's place, if you'll loan me your name till I can think of my own."

It was a deal, but in seven years of glory-holing around the mining camps Mike Talbot never did remember his own name. Until one day the clouds began to break. To Hugh he had said, "We've got to go to Denver, kid! It seems like—like I sort of remember living there once. Maybe I'll see somebody I know."

He never told Hugh about it if he did. But from that visit to Denver, and a subsequent hurried trip to Alamo, the new life and the new Mike Talbot dated. A worried, gloomy Mike, who hunted up Barney Towne and signed on. Maybe there was ranch experience in Mike's past; at any rate, he showed himself to be a top hand, and Towne made him ramrod. It was the end of their easy-going life. Mike lived within himself most of the time from then on.

Towne needed him, as badly as Mike needed a job. Since the death of his wife he had hardly been sober in five years. Mike had stayed on, taking more from him than Hugh had thought he would take from any man.

How much did Lass have to do with their remaining? Hugh wondered. And he knew the answer was—plenty!

"Poor kid needs somebody to side her, living under the same roof with Towne," Mike would argue sometimes, when Hugh got the traveling itch. "If we pulled out the place would go bankrupt; and where would she be?"

Toward Hugh, Lass was as coldly impersonal as a gambler's handshake. They had scrapped every day in the ten years he'd been here. He didn't try to varnish his feelings about her with friendliness. He felt too strongly that Mike was sacrificing everything for her—needlessly and thanklessly.

CHAPTER TWO

Horse Against Horse

FULL daylight was over Poverty Valley by the time the last steer was choused into the pen. Barney Towne himself locked the gate. Mike loped to the back.

"Throw them dinked ponies back in the trap!" he ordered.

Over the bawling of cattle, someone answered him. "What's the matter, Mike? Afraid I'll see they've been working overtime?"

Mike's stocky body twisted in the low-down roping-saddle. But he failed to find the speaker until two men walked from the harness shed.

It was Mark Dennis and a man in a plaid shirt and lemon-colored chaps, and both were laughing.

When they had all gone over to the shed, Barney Towne demanded:

"Where'd you two come from?"

"Over the hill from Beaverhead Creek," said Dennis. "Stayed at Charlie Davis's last night. So this is how you shrink your beef cattle, is it?" He was still grinning, but it was a hard smile without humor.

"I reckon it wouldn't make any difference if I swore they only busted out an hour ago?" Barney Towne appealed. "I tell you they've been penned up all night!"

"Contracts are made to be kept," Dennis told him. "If you can't keep your stock penned up for twelve hours, I'm not going to take the loss for you. I've got to write off five percent for shrinkage, Barney."

Dennis was black Irish, his square-set eyes dark, skin swarthy, black hair showing thin in back. He was forty-five but he carried his trim, wide-shouldered five-ten like a man fifteen years his junior.

"Shrinkage!" snorted Towne. "What will you buyers think of next to make it tough on the cowman?"

"I don't set the styles," Dennis said crisply. "You could have kept those animals penned up away from feed and water for twelve hours, as the contract specified. Well, let's go to it. How many are you offering?"

They went down to the scales, a high-walled, rectangular pen with a wooden floor onto which each steer to be weighed would be prodded.

"Two hundred yearlings and seventy-five steers and heifers," Mike Talbot told him.

"I can use them," Dennis said. Then he laid a hand on the shoulder of the young fellow with him. "You all know my boy, Larry. He'll tally the weights for us."

"Him and me both," corrected Towne slyly. "I'm only aiming to take one cut on this deal."

"If your cows are in the kind of shape they were last fall," Larry Dennis replied, "you'll take more than that. But read them off yourself."

Larry had been cast in the same mold as his father, but he slept a longer night and worked a shorter day, with the result that he packed more weight than he needed. The fat around his eyes gave them a piggish look. He wore a thick brown mustache. The shirt and fancy yellow chaps he wore needed the seasoned look only hard work could give them. He wore pigskin gloves. A tailor-made cigarette dangled from the fingers of one gloved hand.

The job got under way, with Hugh cutting out the steers, Mike doing the chousing, and the others on the weight tally. Barney Towne, squatting by the indicator, called off the tally.

The weighing went into two hours. From time to time the buyer would reject a steer. Red-necks were undesirable in the yards; long horns and overlarge brands counted against an animal. Dennis was a sharp trader. He bought top-rate beef, and that only after haggling the seller into a price that nearly brought the blood.

Finally Dennis made out a check for eighty-six hundred dollars—far less than the Snake-Track would need to get through the coming year. Barney Towne blew up.

But all Dennis said was, "Tell you the trouble with you, Towne. You've turned a first-class iron into a dude's

idea of a ranch. Bucking stock! Bramer bulls! Goats! My Lord! This ain't a cattle ranch any more, it's a game preserve!"

"There's money in rodeo stock!" Towne snapped. "I cleared five thousand last year with my string. Besides, mister, I notice you've built up a sizable bucking string yourself. Figger to give me some competition?"

"I pick up a bucker now and again." Dennis's drawl was a little too casual. "Figger to resell when I find a man with the *ganas* and the cash. I notice you're fooling around with race horses, now."

"Fooling! I got a mare down yonder will beat anything *you* ever saw."

"Not that Little Sister sorrel!"

"She's the baby!"

Dennis laughed. "I make no claims to being a racing man, but I'd give daylight money on my stallion, Heelfly, to beat Little Sister under the wire at the brush meet next week."

Barney Towne cornered him. "How much?"

"Horse against horse."

Towne's grin was wolfish. "You've just lost a horse."

Dennis only smiled. He pocketed his tally book. "I'll arrange for a string of cars the night before the brush meet. You can bring your plug in with the beef herd. She'll be right at home with a bunch of cows!"

Hugh had been watching Larry Dennis for some time, and now, as the pair rode off, he drawled, "I'll bet a purty there's a cut on that Larry's thumb, under those gloves."

"I don't get it," Towne said after a moment.

Mike's jaw dropped. "I do. The dirty sheepherders have reamed us! We found blood on the gate and reckoned one of the boys got cut on it. But what really happened was that that lard-gutted cub of Dennis's sprung the gate last night and cut hisself on the latch doing it!"

Towne's features were blank; then they reddened. "Why the dirty, slimy —! They done it to nick us for that five-percent penalty!"

Suddenly Hugh, staring at the scales, started. Then he began to laugh. "And you came out ahead at that! Look!"

Dusty, bedraggled, Lass Towne was dragging herself from the balance-pit. There was a small trapdoor through which a man might crawl beneath the big platform to adjust and grease the working parts of the scales. The girl had been down there all during the weighing. Corral dust had sifted down upon her and perspiration had traced streaks of mud down her face.

Towne gasped as she came up. "How long have you been down there?"

In Lass's grimy features her eyes had bright glints of anger. "Ever since the weighing started. I knew I locked the gate when I came in, so somebody else must have opened it. That would be a man who stood to profit by it. So I crawled down there, and every time a steer was weighed I sat on the balance arm."

Towne chuckled. "Good girl!"

Lass's blond hair tossed, and her chin tilted. "I hope you'll still say that after I tell you we aren't going through with that bet you made. Little Sister's not going to race that Heelfly!"

Towne put a cigar between his teeth and began to chew on it. "Ain't we? I had a notion Little Sister was my horse."

There was a panicky catch in Lass's voice. "She is, but you know what it would mean to me to lose her! After

the way I've brought her to the chutes myself. You can't do it, Dad!"

Barney's face was bulldoggish. "She's going to run. That's the end of it."

Lass turned to Mike. "She isn't ready to run, Mike—tell him that! She hasn't found her stride yet!"

Mike Talbot patted her arm. "Don't you worry, little lady. She's got a stride that'll take her under that wire a length ahead of Heelfly. Anyway, it's only daylight money we're bucking. Sister can't lose!"

"Unless," Hugh pointed out, "she gets one of them pitching spells of hers. That mare never will be one you can count on. If I was you, Barney, I'd put her in my bucking string."

The pupils of Lass's eyes were black with anger. "You probably would," she said, acid putting a thin, sharp edge on her words. "But if you hadn't botched the job of breaking her, she'd be as track-wise as any of them now. I suppose if the bet's made, it's made. Only, if I were you, I'd be pulling for her pretty strong. Because if she loses I'll be looking for someone who knows how to break horses so they win!"

That was how things stood when they trailed the beef herd into Alamo next week. The threat didn't worry Hugh. Almost, he hoped Little Sister would lose, so that Mike would be more or less duty-bound to string with him after he was fired, if Lass stuck to her threat.

The meet was into the last day before Little Sister and Heelfly were matched for a half. Both had turned in stopwatch performances the first two days.

That last night, Mike got Hugh to stay with the mare while he went for a bait of grub at the cafe. Hugh spent his time currying the horse, feeling the rippling muscles under the brush, the nervous tremors that went through her when he laid his hand on the warm, sleek neck.

It had not been so long ago when he had gone up on Little Sister for the first time. He had come down in under ten seconds. She had a mind to pitch, had Little Sister. She was still a demon to get into the chutes. Let a jockey mount her who betrayed any nervousness, and he finished the race on all fours.

Hugh bent to inspect a slight cut she had acquired on the pastern, when she had tripped over a hidden fence wire. He was squatting like that in the dark stall, the mare standing with head high, nostrils dilated, when the sound of men's voices suddenly came to him.

They were not entirely clear. Seeming to come from Heelfly's quarters, in the opposite run of stalls, the voices were those of Mark and Larry Dennis and some third party Hugh could not identify.

"You can put your money on Heelfly, Sam," Dennis was saying. "He'll double it for you. That's a guarantee."

The man called Sam laughed. "It's as sure as that?"

Hugh stood up, a straight shadow in the corner of the stall. Sauntering on, the man passed a point where he could see them clearly among the litter of wagons, bales of hay, and harness.

"By the way"—Mark Dennis's voice was not entirely casual—"who's promoting the rodeo at the State Fair next summer?"

"You ought to know that! That's what I'm down here for. Hunting a man to supply the stock I'll need."

"Then you can stop looking right here!" Dennis told him. "Did you see Johnny Mullins's bunch of wild animals at Magdalena?"

"He's got a string of plenty mean critters."

"Not any more, he hasn't—I bought him out last month! That's why I'm saying you can leave that contract right here with me!"

The other tucked a cud of tobacco into his cheek. "There's no rush," he said. "I'll be running down to El Paso in the morning to see what Champ Grayson's got to offer."

Dennis spoke hurriedly. "Look, Mr. Cotton— I want to save you some trouble, as well as do myself some good. It ain't for publication, but I'll have double the stock I've got now, by next spring. You'll have your pick of the best in New Mexico."

"How's that?"

"An old booze-fighter I know of is going to be washed up and willing to sell *muy pronto*. When the time's right, I'll take over. So why not let me have the contract tomorrow before you leave?"

Sam Cotton laughed. "Don't crowd me, Mark. I ain't committing myself ten months ahead. I'll be around again for your spring rodeo. Then we can see how things stack up."

What else was said Hugh could not make out. But the conversation left him with plenty of meat to chew on.

Sam Cotton was the biggest rodeo promoter in the Southwest. A man with a first-class rough string could make enough out of stocking him for the Albuquerque show to pay all his expenses for a year. And Mark Dennis intended to be that man.

Heretofore, Hugh had looked on him simply as a shrewd trader who hewed, on occasion, too close to the line. He loomed as a more sinister figure now.

This was October, and the Snake-Track was in no such immediate danger of collapse as Dennis had intimated. Unless—did the buyer have traps set to snare old Barney Towne?

Chapter Three

Cap'n Johnny Rides

HUGH was out in the crisp, bright dawn, walking the stiffness out of Little Sister's legs. The blood sorrel was bulky under three blankets that he whipped off, one by one, as she warmed up. As always on the morning of a race, the feeling of excitement went into Hugh like an electric current.

When he had been walking the horse for nearly two hours, Hugh saw Lass Towne signaling from the paddock.

"Cesario's going to work her out," the girl told him, when he had gone over. She was in fawn colored skirt and a white blouse, a red ribbon in her hair. Her smiles, if she had any on a tense day like this, apparently were not for Hugh.

Cesario had ridden for Barney Towne before. He was a Mexican of forty years, with sharp eyes that kept as busy as a weaver's fingers. Hugh leaned on the rail while the Mexican took the horse around. Cesario was having trouble. Little Sister danced sideways every time she passed the wheeled chutes at the side of the track.

She threw her head whenever another horse got close.

Part of Hugh's attention was caught by the comments of the track crowd standing near him.

"If it was a quarter, I'd give you the mare by a half length. But them pipestem legs of hers won't never carry her to the half pole."

"They're saying Dennis has spotted her a length. That's liable to make a race out of it. But I'll still put my fourbits on Heelfly. He's tough and he's fast."

"You talk like a passel of old women! Heelfly ain't got a show with that horse!"

The voice, an unpleasant sort of snarling whine, made Hugh look at the speaker. He was perched on the railing, a disreputable figure in patched levis and a striped red jersey, an old Union cap on the back of his buzzard-like head.

One of the other men said, "Ain't he? You're crazy as a one-eyed road lizard, Johnny. Look at the reach in them legs of his! Lightning!"

Johnny launched a stream of tobacco juice onto the track. "While you're in a noticing mood, look at his ankles. Limber as a whalebone. It's him that's the quarter horse, not the mare."

There was a pause, the men watching Heelfly as the jockey, Santos Luna, paced by. Little Sister was pulling in beside him.

"Maybe so," the other said. "But I'm betting on the stud!"

The man called Johnny said, "So'm I!"

"But you just said—!"

"I said the mare would win—in a fair race. This ain't going to be one. Her jockey's going to throw it. She's going to come out of the chutes fighting him. Look at her right now—nervous as a cat!"

Little Sister chose that moment to buck-jump sideways into Heelfly. There was an instant of quirting and cursing, of high-strung horses squealing. Suddenly Cesario was across the horse's head in a flat dive. He landed in front of her. Head high, Little Sister bolted. One hoof hit the Mexican's knee and he doubled up, groaning.

Hugh was over the barrier and running across the field, hoping to head the mare off. But it was the old-timer, Johnny, running like a deer, who crossed the field first and captured the runaway's reins, throwing himself at the horse with no apparent regard for broken bones.

Hugh hurried back to Cesario. Barney Towne was there, now, and Lass. Mark Dennis was coming up with his jockey. Cesario, with a broken leg, was white as chalk.

"Tried to quirt me!" he groaned.

Santos Luna, a spindly, fox-faced youth with gopher teeth, did not deny it. "*Seguro que si!* Any man that try to pace my horse—*por Dios*, I quirt him too!"

Hugh's natural sympathy for Cesario was tempered by suspicion. He had violated track ethics by pulling in beside the other horse, trying to size him up.

Barney Towne tried to bluster it through. "This'll cost you your jockey!" he threatened Dennis. "I ain't racing my horse against no quirt-handy Mex. I'll have Luna barred off every track in New Mexico!"

"You'll run against him or forfeit your horse," Dennis retorted. "I reckon these boys will back Santos."

There were those who nodded and others who seemed dubious. The old-

timer who had captured Little Sister settled it, walking the horse up to the group just then.

"Santos done right," he said. "Cesario was trying to pace him. It looks, pardner, as if you're the man that needs a jockey. How'll I do?"

Towne's bloodshot eyes lifted. "Who in Tophet are you?"

"Cap'n Johnny."

That was all he said; but Barney Towne said, "Oh!" and blinked.

Hugh Talbot remembered him, too. You couldn't have a meeting without Captain Johnny any more than you could run a race without horses. His whiny voice, raised in profane advice to a losing rider or cackling praise to a winner, was as unavoidable as the thunder of hoofs.

He had a legion of enemies and a few friends, the latter mostly horses. Going on seventy, Johnny had announced his retirement in ten more years, to sun out his days breaking horses.

Towne rubbed his nose. "Come on over to the paddock," he grunted.

So Captain Johnny was signed on to ride Little Sister. Hugh watched him rub her down an hour before the race. The old jockey slipped the wire basket onto the mare's muzzle, to keep her from eating anything this close to starting time.

"I'll be getting into my colors," he said.

Hugh opened the door of the stall. "They're down in the tack room. You've got a savvying way about you, Johnny. A man like you could calm Little Sister down right nice."

Johnny gave him a toothless grin. "Folks nowadays have forgot how to reason with 'em. I just talk things over with a horse and we usually make some kind of a compromise."

Mike and Barney Towne were in the tack room. Towne was carrying several drinks already. He was raw-tempered and on the butt about trading a good jockey for a dubious one.

It was Hugh who saw it first—the wire basket lying in a corner. Little Sister had her nose buried in a sack of bran and was eating as fast as she could bolt it. Then Captain Johnny saw and let out a yell.

"She's a-foundering herself! Somebody slipped her muzzle!"

With something like a chunk of ice in his stomach, Hugh flung the sack of bran from the stall. The Captain stood back, almost sobbing as he looked at the horse.

"She's swelling already!"

"Thank God she couldn't get at any water!" Mike Talbot said. He glanced at the sack, trying to estimate how much she had eaten. "Lord! she's downed a couple of gallons, if that thing was full!"

The jockey pulled off his cap. "Well, there goes your race, gents."

But Towne, head jutted forward, fists clenched and short arms drawn up, said slowly, "Get a bridle on her."

The tough skin about Johnny's eyes crinkled. "What for—?"

Towne roared his answer, "I'm going to run her!"

Mike gripped his arm. "You'll ruin her, Barney! You can't run a horse in that condition."

"Can't I? Maybe I ought to forfeit the race and trot her over to Dennis! That's what he figgered I'd do, I reckon. But, by heaven, if I'm going to lose her, it'll be a string-halted, wind-broke critter Dennis will take home!"

He clung to his purpose like a leech. Presently they heard the race being

announced. Barney Towne himself put the racing bit in the horse's mouth and led her out. Captain Johnny could do nothing but follow.

Hugh saw Lass coming from the judge's stand. He headed her off, making talk while the two horses were paraded before the stands. But as they were saddled and mounted, she realized there was something wrong.

"What's the matter with Little Sister? She acts sluggish—"

Hugh said quickly, "She's doing fine. The Cap'n's just holding her in."

"Hugh! She—she looks as if she's foundered!"

Striking off the hand he put out to hold her, she ran down the track toward the chutes. But she was too late. Little Sister was too sick to put up her usual fuss at the chutes. The horses broke clean from the barrier, and the stands' roar swept the field like an explosion.

Hugh pulled her off the track. Her body was rigid, not seeming to breathe, turning slowly to follow the horses as they rounded the track. Already Heelfly's deep-chested dun body was straining ahead of the little blood sorrel. Santos Luna, humped over like a monkey, was quirting viciously.

Old Captain Johnny was all but invisible. Plastered along the mare's neck, he was like a part of the horse. He wasn't using his quirt, but somehow Hugh knew he was getting all the horse had to offer.

They hit the home turn, Heelfly pushing Little Sister farther behind with every slamming impact of his hoofs on the track. Uncertainty came into the sorrel's stride. The smooth rhythm of her flashing hoofs was broken. It was a daylight race, for sure. You could line three horses up between them.

Then as they whirled past Hugh and Lass they could see that Captain Johnny was easing in on the reins. Probably he had been doing that for a quarter mile. It was Hugh's guess that if he hadn't the mare would have run herself to death.

When it was all over, Lass leaned against Hugh, her face against his shoulder. "Oh, Hugh! Hugh! They've ruined her!"

Chapter Four

Forest Range

THE crowd wasn't making much noise about it. They knew, if only by Little Sister's staggering progress back to the paddock, that the race had been run under a cloud.

Then, in one of those breath-taking changes of which she was capable, Lass pulled away. "You could have stopped them!" she said. "You knew she wasn't right!"

"We all knew it. But did you ever stop your old man from doing what he wanted?"

Lass's look, full of scorn, stung him with quick anger. "I'm not trying to pass the buck!" he said, on the defensive. "We tried—"

She was going toward the paddock before he could finish. Hugh followed slowly, his lips pale with anger. Down at the end of the stables, among the wagons, he found Barney Towne, Mike, and Captain Johnny. Towne was laying it on with the big trowel.

"I've got my belly full of you and your lunk-headed tricks! Last week you cost me five hundred dollars'

worth of beef! Today it's a six-hundred-dollar mare!"

Anger pumped the blood darkly through Mike's square-cut features.

"You know whose fault it was that Little Sister ran!" he snapped. "The job ain't on my head."

"No?" Towne closed one eye and squinted through the other. "Who left her alone to be tampered with?"

"You as much as me!" said Mike.

Towne began to curse him, taking a sadistic enjoyment in it. When he could listen no longer, Hugh stepped in. Grabbing a handful of shirt front, he jammed the Snake-Track boss against a wagon. Towne began to struggle, but against his liquor-rotted bulk Hugh was all tough muscle and bone.

"Take a dally on your jaw, you whisky-guzzling old boar hog!" he told him. "I can't speak for Mike, but me—I'm accepting your invite to get out. You've been itching to show who's the brains of the outfit. Well, I hope you find out! When they talk about Barney Towne savvying to raise beef, they're talking about Mike Talbot. When they say you're the best man with rodeo stock in New Mexico, they're still talking about him. Mike kept you in drinking-likker for ten years. He's kept the ranch from going under while you lay sleeping off your drunks. And I hope to hell he's got enough of it now!"

Barney Towne, wriggling from his grasp, made sputtering sounds. He swung a haymaker that Hugh caught on the shoulder. Hugh struck him just once, on the ear, and Towne reeled away, ran into a wagon tongue, and crashed face first in the dirt.

Mike's face was wrinkled, as if with pain. "Hugh! You—you shouldn't have done it!"

"I should have done it five years ago!" Breathing hard, his face ridged with sinew under the brown skin, Hugh demanded, "For the last time—are you staying, or coming with me?"

Mike gripped his arm. "Don't you see the spot I'm in? I can't leave Lass now, with him like this—"

The girl, as always. A flush, perhaps of jealousy, darkened Hugh's cheeks.

"Always the girl, eh, Mike? It isn't what you owe yourself—it's how she'll make out. Luck to you, anyway. I'll be around to pick up my warsack. Have the boys cut out my calves, will you?"

Mike's eyes were full of searching. "What do you aim to do"

"Take a government lease on a few sections of forest. Raise beef, maybe some horses. I've got the calves I've taken for wages, and those colts Harley Dalker gave me for busting horses last summer. I'll make out."

All Mike could say as he turned to leave was, "If you ever need a few bucks, son—" But he did not try to stop him, and Hugh knew, then, that the bond that held him to the Snake-Track was a strong one.

Captain Johnny, still in his colors, came up as Hugh was saddling his horse. He stood watching him, chewing his perennial cud of fine-cut.

"Couldn't help hearing the fireworks, pardner. Maybe you won't mind a suggestion from a gent that's been around horses so long he's commencing to whinny. Get hold of that Little Sister horse!"

Hugh frowned into the eyes that were like blue brilliants set in seasoned cowhide. "What do I want with a wind-broke mare?"

"Matter of sentiment, you might say. Never seen a horse get a rawer

deal. I'd like to try my hand at bringing that horse back!"

"Little Sister's not worth a gamble. I can't afford a trainer, anyway."

Captain Johnny fetched to his lips the grin that a man could not help answering. "That's the point. I go with the horse. All I'll cost you is a little grub. You buy her and I'll put her back on her feet."

The idea awoke a warm pulse within Hugh. If Captain Johnny thought the horse could be salvaged, maybe it was possible. He liked the notion of Little Sister stretching the tape in front of a field of the best horses in New Mexico.

In the end, he dropped the reins of his horse over the rack. "You could talk a gopher into climbing a tree," he told Johnny. "Let's find Dennis."

So Hugh made a trade with Mark Dennis. Five yearlings for one broken-down race horse. Dennis didn't want her enough to bicker. But, for Hugh, making a deal with Dennis was the hardest part; he couldn't doubt that Dennis was the one who had foundered the mare, not knowing Barney Towne was the stripe to kill a horse rather than forfeit her.

At the land office next day, Hugh took an all-year lease on thirty sections of forest range in the Magdalenas. Driving seventy head of cattle and two dozen horses, he and Johnny crossed the Snake-Track and began the climb into the mountains.

Staked about by lofty peaks, his range lay in a rugged timberland broken into deep canyons as if by a giant plow. At the foot of a frowning cliff of blue granite lay a small park, a green patch of grass and pines watered by a cold, deep creek. It was between the stream and the cliff, in a scope of incense cedar, that Hugh and Captain Johnny built the Padlock headquarters.

One day in late November Lass Towne rode up.

Hugh hadn't known, until he saw her, how her absence had left a little empty pocket in him. Maybe, he told himself, he needed somebody to scrap with.

"How's Mike?" he asked her.

"He's fine." Her gaze went appraisingly about the yard and outbuildings as they began to walk toward the barn. "You're building a real ranch here, Hugh. I'm proud of you."

"Surprised, I reckon, that I didn't decide to run sheep!"

Lass stopped and looked up at him. "Please, Hugh—let's bury the hatchet for a while."

"If it suits you!"

Reaching the barn, Lass glanced inside. Hugh watched her, grinning.

"Where's Little Sister?" she asked.

"Over in Big Canyon somewhere."

"How is she?"

"Good enough."

"Captain Johnny's still working with her?"

Hugh began to play with a rope. "He gave up a couple of weeks ago. Says she's too wind-broke for anything but a bucking horse. Even if she could run, she ain't to be trusted. She's still a pitching fool!"

Gone was the color from Lass's cheeks, and her voice was unsteady. "You're just saying that to—to make me angry, aren't you?"

"No, why should I? If she wants to pitch, I'll let her—for a profit. She hasn't got the *tripas* to last long, but even for one season it would be worth it. Afterward I'll still have a good stock horse."

"But they'd kill her!" Lass exclaimed. "She isn't strong enough for a tough game like that."

"You'd think she was tough enough if you'd been the one that broke her. I figured I'd let that Mexican, Pete Chavez, have her this winter. If she isn't a bad horse when he gets through with her, then Pete's forgot how to use those Chihuahua spurs of his!"

Lass's face was white. Words came through a lump in her throat. "If you do that to Little Sister I'll—"

"You'll do what?"

Tears blurred the girl's eyes. In lieu of speaking, she slapped him. Then she ran back to her horse.

Regret piled upon Hugh, suddenly, and he started after her. For the first time, he knew he didn't really want to hurt Lass. Yet he was forever doing it, deriving a vicarious revenge on Barney Towne.

He didn't dislike Lass, as he'd made himself think. He could like her a lot, if— But there was that "if" between them, and always would be, while she was the anchor that held Mike down.

Hugh saddled and rode up the pasture, but the strange new loneliness he was trying to escape stayed with him all that day, and for many more.

Chapter Five

Wiped Out!

IN DECEMBER, Hugh made a trip to Fort Selden and got a contract for fifty trained horses. Buying very shrewdly all the way home, he hit the Poverty with a score of good broncs. He and the Captain worked them over until March.

It was hard work—men's work. Hugh would have been lost without Captain Johnny. In Johnny's lexicon, there was no such word as "outlaw."

"Me and them broncs," he told Hugh, "just naturally talk the same language. We savvy each other. It's no use to fight a horse. I learned that long ago."

He would let Hugh take the rough edge off the broncs. Then he'd take them in hand, work with them, break them to rope, to stand, to handle on their hind legs. They were ready far ahead of schedule.

"By hokey, did I ever see a horse reach!" Johnny marveled one morning. They were standing in the middle of the small, circular track, the horse loping easily at the end of the long rope the Captain held.

"Think she'll ever run a half again?" Hugh wanted to know. "She's still dragging her hind legs."

"When I'm done with her, she'll be a miler."

"That's strong talk," said Hugh. "How long is this miracle going to take?"

The trainer's gray, stubbly jaws worked a handful of tobacco down to eating size.

"Confidentially," he said, "Little Sister could run the plates off Heelfly right now, in a half. I aim to run her at Alamo in June."

"But she hasn't shown anything, yet!" Hugh instantly regretted the statement, because Captain Johnny turned the scorching heat of his contempt upon him.

"P'raps you'd like to change trainers? Maybe I don't know my business, after fifty-five years! Mister, when I say a hoss is ready—she's ready."

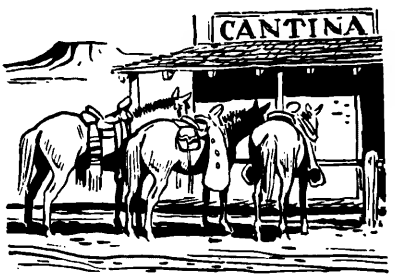
"You're the boss!" Hugh assured him. "If you say we take her to Chur-

chill Downs, we'll do it! I'm only saying she hasn't raised much dust while I've been watching."

Captain Johnny grunted. "That's because I've held her down. Them legs will loosen up, once I let her step out."

The idea took hold of Hugh. "Race her in June, eh? That gives us two and a half months. I'd give a lot to see her take the whole field!"

"You will." Coming from Captain Johnny, that was a promise.



When spring came to the valley, Hugh left Captain Johnny to tend the stock, one day, and took the wagon down to Alamo to buy roundup necessities—vaccine, dehorners, and a load of chuck.

He ran into Mike for the first time in months. While they drank beers, Hugh noted the weariness of his face.

"So the iron's still sliding downhill," he remarked.

"Danged near to the bottom," Mike admitted. "We've lost a heap of stock somewhere. I'm starting roundup next week, but the count's going to be twenty percent off. The worst of it is, I can't blame Towne!"

With almost a physical start, Hugh remembered the conversation he had overheard between Dennis and Sam Cotton at the brush meet eight months ago. He asked quickly, "Any idea where they're going?"

Mike pushed the beer glass around in the spilled foam. "Some kind of fever's knocking them over. Carcasses around all the tanks. I had the water tested, and it's all right. It looks like sleeping sickness—but twenty percent!"

Hugh looked into Mike's eyes, his voice held low. "I wish I'd had sense enough to tell you this before. I heard Mark Dennis promise Sam Cotton, the rodeo promoter, that he'd have taken over the Snake-Track by June. That was last October. When did you start losing cattle?"

Mike's eyes were as hard as chilled steel, and his fingers vised on the handle of the mug.

"Three months ago. Just after Dennis tried to buy the iron!"

"If I'd only told you!" Hugh said. "You could have had men riding the rims all year. Somehow, Dennis has got to your cattle!"

Mike shook his head. "The way it looks, I reckon we'll go under before the beef roundup. I wouldn't give a damn, except—"

"For Lass." Hugh's wide mouth smiled.

Mike linked his stubby fingers and scowled at them, hunting for the words he wanted. "You hurt her when she was up there, Hugh," he said finally.

"Just threw a scare into her," Hugh told him. "I let her think I'm making Little Sister into a bucker."

"That wasn't all. She came to me the day after she was up, and she'd been crying. She said, 'Why does Hugh hate me, Mike?' and I said I didn't guess you did. But she said she was sure you did from how you always acted. I said I guessed she wasn't wasting any love

on you anyway, and she told me, 'That's just it. I like Hugh—a lot, Mike. I wish I didn't. I wish I could hate him like he does me!' "

Hugh's grin was to hide his real emotion. "You aren't going to pull a John Alden on me, are you?"

"Not exactly. But I'm going to tell you something I've dodged for a long time. You remember the trip we made to Denver that time?"

"When you thought your memory was coming back?"

Mike nodded. "Well—it did come back—and I wished to hell, then, that it never had!"

"Mike, you never told me that!"

"I had my reasons. You see, I wasn't exactly prideful of who I was, or what I'd done, after it came back to me. I'd had a wife, Hugh, as fine and lovely a woman as ever married a worthless glory-holer. We had a little place in Denver, but I wasn't there more'n a month or two out of the year. But the last time I wandered off I swore would be my last. We had a six-months-old baby girl by then. All I wanted was a decent stake to support them right.

"What I got that time, instead of a pot of gold, was a crack over the noggin with a twelve-inch stull timber. When we went back to Denver, I got the shock that made me wish I'd never remembered. They'd reported me as dead in that cave-in! My wife had waited three years and then married a cattleman from Alamo—Barney Towne!

"I guess you can figure the rest. She'd been dead a couple of years when I found Barney Towne. But there was still my daughter. I thought of taking her away from Towne. But I knew that wouldn't have been fair to him. He loved her like his own kid, and he had troubles enough without my making things worse. Besides, I wasn't sure she'd go with—with a stranger. After I'd been with them a couple of years, I knew she wouldn't. She's got too much loyalty, that kid. Naturally, I never told either of 'em about who I was. It would just have messed things up. But I guess," he finished, smiling wryly, "it couldn't have messed 'em up much worse than they are anyhow!"

Mike stood up, blowing his nose. "Well, that's why I've hung with it. I just thought I'd tell you, so if you do feel that way toward Lass you can do something about it before it's too late, Hugh."

They walked up the street toward Hugh's buckboard. Hugh's thoughts were so confused that he could not separate and pigeonhole them.

He was still searching for the right phrases when across the street he saw Lass coming toward them. As cool and haughty as ever, she gave Hugh a look that made him wonder how a man would ever get close enough to this girl to talk about love.

"Dad would like to see you over in the land office, Hugh," she said.

"Me? What's up?"

"I don't know. Something about the old Baylor place, I think. You might want to go along, Mike." With that she walked on down the street and passed into a store.

Crossing the street, Mike growled, "What's that yahoo up to now? He's made four visits here in the last month."

The land agent, a vulture-eyed little man, was tracing with his forefinger across a big map spread on the counter as they entered. Barney Towne looked up from it.

Hugh went over and asked, "What's

on your mind?"

"I've been asked by Mr. Towne to have you vacate certain of his lands which you are now occupying," Spreckles began. "Namely, a parcel of government forest reserve bounded by a line commencing at a brass-capped cement stake—"

Hugh straightened as though a ramrod had been threaded down his spine. He glanced into Towne's vein-webbed grinning face, then spun the map to examine it.

"Show me! If I'm using one acre of his land I'll stock it with black-polled Anguses free of charge!"

Spreckles's face showed no eagerness for the job ahead. "You are using," he said, "exactly fifteen sections of land now owned by Mr. Towne."

"*Now* owned!" Hugh's eyes snapped to Towne. "All right, Towne, what's the game? Fifteen sections is half of my range!"

"Remember the old Baylor place?" Towne asked.

Hugh nodded. "Baylor ran cattle up in the Magdalenas, near my place. The ruins of his shack aren't far from me. But he's been dead five years. Any lease he had must have reverted years ago!"

"He didn't have a lease."

"You mean he was trespassing all that time?"

Spreckles came in again: "Mr. Baylor owned the land. He was an old Civil War man, and took out his soldier's bonus in a plot of government land. I don't know how I missed it when I granted you your lease. Mr. Towne's lawyer ran across it and—er—Mr. Towne bought the plot for back taxes."

Hugh stretched the map out in his two hands, his eyes hard. "What's the extent of it?"

Barney Towne showed him. "It takes all of that Granite Springs section, and about half of the rest of your lease. Including Cold Springs, Granite Creek—all your water rights, you might say."

Hugh put the map down. He faced Towne, his features pale and hard. "All right, you buzzard, you've asked for it!" Suddenly he took Towne by the neck and rammed him against the wall. Towne squalled as his fist drew back.

Spreckles was yelling excitedly. "See here! You can't pull anything—"

But it was Mike, pulling Hugh back by the shoulder and snapping, "Take it easy! One good lick would kill the old sot!" who brought him to his senses.

Inside, Hugh was shaking. This was wipe-out! The dry Magdalena Mountains didn't offer another all-year spring within fifty miles. Eight months' work and most of his cash were forfeit to Barney Towne's revenge.

"I start roundup tomorrow to cut out my strays and throw your animals over on your own lease. Headquarters will be at Long-Time Corral, if you're going to send a rep," Towne said, then stalked out.

Hugh and Mike left a moment later. Hugh remarked, "Dumb like a lobo wolf, isn't he? I've still got the Padlock, but he's got the key!"

Mike laid a hand on his shoulder. "I've got an idea," he said, his words slow and full of thought. "You go on back. Be at Long-Time Corral around ten tomorrow. Larry Dennis will be there, repping for his father. I'm putting all our chips on one card—and I hope it's the right one!"

CHAPTER SIX

Barney Towne Swears Off

DAWN was a grayness against the dusty windowpanes when Barney Towne awoke the next morning to the knowledge that someone was standing beside his bed.

"Towne!" he heard a man's voice say. "Git outa there!"

Towne tried to focus his bleary gaze but made out only wide shoulders against the pale square of the window. "Who in hell says it?"

"Mike Talbot! Horses are saddled, mules packed, and we're a-waiting on you!"

"Waiting for what?" Towne sat up in bed.

Mike Talbot leaned over and hooked a big hand around the back of his neck. "For you to get in your work clothes! A top-hand rancher always rides roundup with his crew. Shake a leg!"

"Mike, you damned jughead!" The ramrod's jerk pulled him out of bed. Towne tried to push him away. "I say I ain't riding! Get out of here now or I'll beat the living tar out of you! Well, what are you waiting for?"

"For you to get dressed or beat the tar out of me. You're riding, mister! Maybe you thought I'd swaller your breaking Hugh, like I have a thousand other insults. But we've crossed the bridge! I don't reckon you know why I've held this broken-down spread together so long. Not for you or the salary—for Lass. Take a deep breath, Towne, prepare yourself for a shock—Lass is my daughter!"

Towne grunted. "Hell! I've knowed that for years!"

"You—you knew?"

"Ever look in a mirror? Chips off the same block. And if I hadn't been able to see it, I'd of savvied it because you've hung around so long, hating my guts as much as you do!"

Mike rallied from his shock. "Which makes me hate your guts more than ever! If you knew, why didn't you say so?"

"Reasons of my own," growled Towne. He turned to go back to bed. "Now get out of here!"

"Not so fast!" Mike reached out and held him. "My plans ain't changed none! I aim to show you some things you've forgot. That a ranch don't run itself. That somebody works his head off to keep it in the black. And maybe you think Hugh didn't put out a little work to build the Padlock up! That's rough, tough country, Towne. I think you'll agree along about next week when you've put in eighteen hours a day on one meal a day and no likker! Now, mister, get into your duds!"

In the poor light, Mike Talbot did not see Towne's fist until it landed on his ear. There was power in the blow. Mike went to his knees, heavily. But in a moment he was coming to his feet. Towne swung again; Mike parried the fist and sank a blow into the rancher's belly.

Mike slammed a fist into the side of Towne's head. Reeling, the rancher grabbed at the dresser. The thing went over with a din of broken bottles and mirror. Snorting like a galloping bull, Towne lunged into the foreman.

That was his last mistake. A dozen men seemed to be throwing fists at him. They spatted all over his body. Bruising, crippling, drawing blood—but never finishing him.

Pawing out with his hands, the Snake-Track boss backed down the wall and into the corner. He took more punishment than Mike Talbot thought he could stand. His face was a welter of blood and puffy swellings; his chest must have ached from the booming blows that thundered against it repeatedly.

But in the end Barney Towne gasped, "I'm–done–Mike!"

Mike stepped back, rubbing his skinned knuckles. "All right. I told the boys last night that you'd be riding with us. So don't try to back out now or they'll think you've gone yellow. Pack up your warsack and be out in twenty minutes."

Camp was pitched at Long-Time Corral, the remains of an old Mexican goat camp at the head of Green Rock Canyon. Old Dirty, the cook, was stewing because everything breakable in his moonshine packs had been broken. The country, too rough for a chuck wagon, had necessitated packing in all his equipment.

Hugh had only half expected to see Barney Towne. When he rode in and got a look at him he experienced a shock. Towne looked as though he had been dragged at the end of a rope all the way from the Snake-Track. His face was skinned, his eyes black, one leg was lame. He was whipping loose the ropes that held his warsack on the pack animal when Hugh rode in.

Mike Talbot shouldered him aside and took over the job. "Go grab yourself some chuck," he said. "I'll finish for you."

Mike winked at Hugh when he had thrown off the square hitch. He lifted the heavy pack, weighing all of one hundred and fifty pounds, carried it to the trees, and dropped it heavily. Barney Towne sat watching.

Theoretically the pack consisted of blankets rolled around a miscellany of odds and ends a cowboy found necessary in his rambling life. But what Hugh heard when the pack dropped was the muffled jangle of broken glass.

Affecting astonishment, Mike prodded the roll with his toe. "Sounds like something broke, Boss! Bottle of liniment, mebbe."

Barney Towne said nothing. But there was black desperation in his eyes as he turned away and poured coffee with a hand that shook.

Mike paired Hugh with Larry Dennis for the afternoon circle. Dennis was seeing that his father's interests were protected. Should any Frying Pan strays be found, Dennis would cut them out and drive them back when roundup was finished.

Barney Towne took a sad beating that day. For the first time in years, he had gone all day without a drink. The effect was evident in the putty-pallor of his face and the jerking of his muscles when he tried to handle knife and fork.

He sat hunched with his back against a tree, slopping his food down and drinking coffee by the quart. Nerves twitched his eyes and mouth grotesquely.

For the two days the roundup crew combed the rugged canyon country for Hugh's cattle. They had about seventy head bunched up in the corral, among them a few Frying Pan and Snake-Track animals.

By now Barney Towne looked like a dissipated ghost. He hadn't found sleep in three nights. There were brown patches under his eyes. He

couldn't smoke because his fingers threw the makings all over the landscape. Hugh, hating him as he did, knew a growing fear that he would throw a fit on them.

When they came in that last night, Hugh saw Larry Dennis motion Towne over to his blankets. A little later, while they were eating, Mike Talbot suddenly leaned close to Towne and smelled his breath. Then he sat up straight and announced:

"Some dirty son has brought likker into this camp!"

No one spoke. Mike got up and went back to Larry Dennis's blankets. With a choked sound, the Snake-Track boss leaped up, spilling his food. He reached Mike in five seconds, but by this time the ramrod had the bottle out.

Towne grabbed at it and Mike shoved him away. He gave the pint flask a sling into the creek. Towne went rigid as the crash of broken glass hit his ears. Then, without warning, he went after Mike Talbot.

He swung once and stopped. Stiffening, his body toppled forward like a plank. A moment later he began to thresh in wild convulsions. Mike was on him with a yell. He pinned him flat while cowboys ran to help. Somebody jammed a wadded handkerchief between the rancher's teeth to keep him from biting his tongue.

For fifteen minutes Barney Towne continued to kick and jerk in delirium tremens. One of the punchers said, finally, "It jest looks like we'd have to bat the old boy over the head to calm him down. Somebody fetch a rock."

"To heck with that!" Dirty, the cook, yanked a blanket from a bed and laid it out flat on the ground. "I've heard someplace you can roll them up so tight in a blanket that they can't move an eyelash. Lug him over here!"

Rolled up like a cocoon, Towne was quiet. Presently he passed out. When he regained consciousness, he was lying on his own blankets. Dirty carried him a cup of ink-black coffee. Towne drank it. Before long he was asleep.

He was still sleeping when Hugh rode out with Dennis the next morning. Their circle took them down into the foothills bordering the Snake-Track range. By a small tank Hugh found a dead cow so bloated her legs stuck up like the legs of a sawhorse. Dismounting, he scooped up a handful of water and tested it. It tasted sweet enough.

Suddenly Hugh threw the water aside. Dennis watched him walk to a salt block almost hidden in the brush. The puncher squatted by it. Then, turning his head, he called to Dennis.

"This is a damn peculiar-looking salt lick. It's been bored full of little holes and then filled up with something that ain't salt."

Dennis's piggish eyes were unsteady as he regarded the block and glanced at Hugh. "What—what do you reckon it is?"

Hugh growled, "I'll know better after I have a chunk of it analyzed. But my guess is—poison!"

With his pocket knife, he hacked off a piece and stuck it into his jumper pocket. He saw little of Dennis the rest of the day, and that night, when he came in, driving a few cattle, he saw that the cowboy hadn't shown up yet. He had the quick suspicion that Dennis had pulled out fast.

But in a short time Dennis came in. Chuck time was a utensil-rattling interval of intense eating. Dirty stood by his fire, watching with satisfaction as

the ravenous roundup hands put away third portions of son-of-a-gun stew.

"How's she go, gents?" he asked presently. There were grunts of satisfaction. Dirty began to grin. "I allus did say a cowhand didn't rate no better grub than a cow. And now I've proved it."

Startled eyes lifted to his mustached face. "Meaning what?" Mike asked.

"I ran low on salt. Knowed you'd holler if I fed you unsalted stew, so I throwed in a chunk of salt lick. But I reckon what's good enough for a cow ought to be good enough for rannihans anyway."

Larry Dennis tossed his plate at the dishpan, then frowned. "Where'd you find any lick around camp?" he demanded.

"Oh, some jigger left a hunk in the knife drawer. I don't know what for. But I just throwed it in the stew and—"

"Godamighty!" Dennis came straight up. His features were pea-green. He began to retch. "Water!" he gasped. "Somebody—get—water!"

Hugh was suddenly before him. "What's wrong, Dennis? Just because a cow licked off it before you did—"

Dennis looked like a rat in a corner. He started to speak, his slack lips shaking. "I—I—" His mouth clamped shut and he bolted for the water keg. He stuck his head in and began to drink great, noisy gulps.

Hugh's voice went through the silent camp. "All right, Dennis. You can relax now. I just wanted to make sure you and your old man left that poisoned block there. Thanks for the help, Dirty. You see, I've still got the salt right in my pocket, Dennis—"

Dennis came up with his face dripping. A look of amazement spread through his features; then rage came to make his eyes sooty and distort his mouth. Fist drawn back, he went after Hugh Talbot.

Hugh let him come close. Then his long body pivoted, right hand driving straight to the puncher's face. Dennis's neck snapped. His forward rush carried him on for several feet before he stumbled and fell. He lay there like a shot beef.

To Mike, Hugh said, "So that's how Mark Dennis plays the game! Now that you know the rules, maybe you can even the score up one of these days."

Dennis left that same night. But if finding the poisoned lick had been a surprise, Barney Towne pulled a bigger one the next day.

After his fit of drunken horrors, he had begun to look better. There was a clearer look to his eyes. His skin had lost that fish-belly color. He startled the whole camp at breakfast by telling a joke—something no man had heard him do in years.

Afterward, when the punchers were preparing to leave, Towne said, "Come back here and set down. I've got some *habla* to make. And I want it down on record that I'm not drunk or crazy. It's the first time I've been able to say that in fifteen years. Mike," he said, putting out his hand to the foreman, "I've thought and said some mean things about you this week."

Mike's eyes studied him, as if fearing a trick. "Can't blame you," he grunted. "Tapering off ain't exactly salve for the temper."

"I'm not tapering off. I've quit!" Towne looked about the ring of faces, as if calling them to witness. "You've done a job for me, Mike, that I hadn't the guts to do for myself. I wish you'd

done it years ago."

Mike was smiling.

"So do I!"

"But in a way," Towne added, "you were responsible for me getting into this blind alley. I was jealous. I knew what Lass meant to you—and I knew she cared for you a sight more than she did for me."

"Not that she ever showed it," Hugh put in.

"She knew better'n to. Knew I'd get crazy-jealous and be worse than ever. You've got a kick coming too, son. But maybe you'll feel better when I tell you I'm signing over that Sam Baylor claim to you. You can throw your cows back on the range anytime you like. Far as I'm concerned, the roundup is over!"

Hugh glanced at Mike, his mouth softening. "Mike, you'd better smell his breath again. He talks *muy borrachado* to me!"

"No, by heck, I'm sober. But I'm going to ask a favor of you in return."

"Name it."

"I want you to ride with my outfit at the rodeo next week," Towne said. "I had a talk with Sam Cotton and Dennis in town. Seems like Cotton's looked over all the bucking stock in the state and likes Alamo's best. He's on the fence as to whether he wants me or Dennis to supply him for the state fair. It means five thousand dollars to the man he picks. So here's how he's going to decide. Me and Dennis have both got a nice bunch of riders. We're going to match them at the rodeo, my boys to ride his buckers and 'dog his bulls, his boys to tackle mine. The outfit with the most points wins. Will you side me?"

"You've just got a bronc stomper!" Hugh told him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Kiss—for Luck

RODEO time found Alamo primed to the exploding point on the news of the Snake-Track-Frying Pan wager. Alamo knew defeat would mean Barney Towne was finished. But the town knew Mark Dennis, too, and understood he was playing to win.

Hugh and Captain Johnny kept Little Sister hidden in a rear stall at the livery stable. Fearful of tampering, they brought her in at night and bribed the liveryman to secrecy.

Captain Johnny vowed he had never seen a fitter horse in his life. She was a different mare from the one Mark Dennis had supposedly ruined in October. As far as Dennis knew, Little Sister was growing fat in some Magdalena park, her racing days done.

Johnny's plan was to save the horse for the sweepstakes the last day, when every top race horse in the county would run. For the little shriveled-up racetrack man, those two days were a torment of waiting. Watching Heelfly win every race he entered was the bitterest pill he had to swallow.

But for Hugh, they were two tough days of getting his insides shaken up on those Frying Pan buckers and risking his neck bedding down mean-tempered bulls. Lap-and-tap rules were in force, and the toll of injuries was already high.

By morning of the third day, the Snake-Track was running behind. Towne showed his boys the tally sheet while they waited behind the chutes for the calf roping to finish.

"We need a pair of firsts and half the second and third money, to win," he told them dispiritedly. "It kind of looks like we need a miracle. That Larry Dennis tramp, for all his fancy yaller chaps and silk shirt, has got the lot of you licked in the saddle-bronc riding. But if Hugh don't draw another Chihuahua outlaw, I hope for a first in the 'dogging. You, Taggart, I'm counting on to take first money in the bareback-bronc riding."

Taggart, a stringy redhead, looked at the palm of his hand, from which the surcingle had peeled most of the skin the day before. "If my danged hand gives out," he said, "I'll be lucky to finish third."

And Taggart's hand did give out. Consternation hit the Snake-Track camp when he was thrown in less than the short limit, and the Dennis boys took first and second money.

An hour later the pendulum swung back, when Hugh grabbed a surprise first in the bronc riding, right out of Larry Dennis's hands. Mark Dennis had jobbed him with the meanest outlaw in his string, but Hugh had hung in the hooks and circle-saw-spurred the bronc all over the arena. He hadn't been breaking horses all winter for nothing.

Up on the judge's stand, Sam Cotton was announcing the final event. "The bulldoggin' contest, folks! Free-for-all rules—and the devil take the hindmost! Watch Chute Four—Larry Dennis coming out after Yellow Fever!"

The barrier banged open, and Dennis rocketed after the big Chihuahua bull. 'Dogging bat slapping his pony's flank, he pulled in beside the brute and dived for the slick horns. The bull went down in churning brown dust. Dennis wrenched the big head over and, sitting on the neck, held his hands aloft.

A yell went across the field like a tornado. Hugh groaned. It had been a beautiful job—too beautiful. Cotton was waving his arms.

"The time—eight and one-half seconds!"

Up on the chute bars, the Snake-Track outfit was silent. Dennis had set a new arena record. Then Hugh heard his name being called. He jumped down and hurried over, conscious of one thing: that what happened in the next half-hour would decide whether the Snake-Track was to be shuffled into the limbo of old outfits that had outgrown their time!

Waiting behind the foul line, he was nervous, jumpy. As the barrier slammed open he saw, from the corner of his eye, a flash of movement behind the chute, and he guessed what had happened. Someone had given the brute a jolt of high-life, the stinging concoction that turns a horse or a bull crazy.

He knew he couldn't beat Dennis's time before he ever swung the bat. The steer was going like a cannonball. Hugh's cutting pony gave him his try. He came down heavily on the broad neck, popping the sinews with the

wrenching power he put into his arms. His heels dragged the animal to a stop. Hugh bedded him down and the field judge's red flag flashed.

"Nine seconds!"

On a wrenched ankle, Hugh limped off the field. He was surprised at the time, the best he had ever made. Still it was one-half second too slow. He had only one more chance; one more ride in which to set an average better than Dennis's.

None of the other riders came close to Dennis's mark. The second round came up with the Flying Pan bunch already cocky with victory. Larry Dennis went out after his second bull. It was a ride that brought every spectator in the stands to his feet. Dennis was out there like a bolt of lightning, knocking over his bull before it had time to pick up its full speed.

Hugh knew before they announced it that it was even better time than his former ride. He knew, too, that it had been dishonest. One of the gatemen had held the barrier long enough to throw the bull off balance.

Mike protested. But the judges hadn't seen it, and Sam Cotton let the time be announced—eight seconds!

Hugh was about to swing into the saddle when someone touched his arm. It was Lass who stood behind him. All the hardness was gone out of her manner.

"I thought you might need this—for luck," she said.

Her hands went up to Hugh's face. She pulled him down to her and for a moment her lips were warmly soft against his. But when she released him, Hugh's arm went around her waist and he caught her to him. They were calling him to the chutes, but he held her there a moment, gripping her hands.

"Some people would call that a promise."

"If you want me, Hugh, that's what I'll call it." Lass's eyes were serious, with little shadows of fear darkening them. "But we've got to win, or I can't keep it. I'll never leave Barney while he's down. So you see—you'll have to win—for us!"

From his position beside the bull-pen, Hugh could see the bull he had drawn. It was a powerful-shouldered, short-legged animal with pink-rimmed eyes set in a massive head. Its long, down-curving horns were sharpened to needle points on the brush tangles of Chihuahua, where Dennis had bought him. He would be fast and tough, and Hugh, his arm raised with the 'dogging bat, knew only luck would let him spill the brute in less than ten seconds.

Now the gate was open, the bull thundering into the clear. Hugh's pony shot after him. Coming alongside, Hugh leaned out across the shaggy red back. The certainty was lead in his heart that he could never 'dog this brute down in time to do the Snake-Track any good. Then he remembered what he had almost forgotten, that the rules were free-for-all. Anything went. And the plan that came into his mind was sheer suicide.

The stands went silent as they saw what he was going to do. He dived on the bull's neck and took an over-under grip on those bladelike horns. Then his legs gave a kick, hurling his body in the path of the animal's hoofs.

That was all the spectators could see of it. Up on the chute bars Captain Johnny let out a high-pitched yell as the bull stumbled and went down on the bulldogger's body. The brute's

hindquarters semaphored over his head. Dust obscured the rest. When the field judges rode in, they found the bull lying with a broken neck, ten feet from Hugh Talbot. Hugh lay as he had fallen, one arm crumpled under his head.

It was Captain Johnny Hugh saw when he came back to consciousness. He was lying in the shade behind the judge's stand. Lass was wringing out a wet cloth to put on his forehead. Mike and all the Snake-Track boys except Barney Towne were standing around him.

The rodeo doctor was closing his bag. "Keep him quiet awhile," he said. "He's shook up considerable. But the crazy jughead hasn't got a thing wrong with him that I can find!"

Hugh's eyes flicked over the faces about him, trying to read in them what he wanted to know. His hand stayed Lass's as she started to place the compress.

"Did they announce—?"

"Seven seconds!" the Captain cackled. "A new record on anybody's track."

"And we won?" He knew as soon as he said it that they hadn't. Mike shook his head.

"A tie! Twenty-seven points apiece. They're up there, now, trying to decide whether to flip a coin, or what."

Hugh sat up. "Gimme a hand. I'm going up there. I've got an idea of my own."

They tried to stop him, but Hugh staggered over to the stand and Mike had to hurry to keep him from falling. When they reached the little knot of officials, in which Mark Dennis and Barney Towne were standing at opposite sides with glares for each other, Sam Cotton was saying:

"Well, a coin has always settled every argument I ever got into. I've no preference in the matter. You've both got a good string of stock."

"I've got an idea, Mr. Cotton."

Sam Cotton looked at Hugh as he shouldered into the circle. He smiled, noting the mud and blood on the bronc rider's face. "I suppose you want to run the 'dogging match over again!"

"Not today," Hugh grinned. "Dennis, do you still think that Heelfly of yours is a race horse?"

"You won't catch him pulling no wagons. What have you got that's faster?"

"A blood-sorrel mare called Little Sister."

Dennis's jaw loosened. "Little Sister! That plug I sold you last fall? She'll never run in anything but the String-halt Handicap."

"If that's what you think of her," Hugh remarked, "you ought to fall right in with my notion of how to settle this. Little Sister belongs to Lass Towne. I'm giving her back as of right now. Lass will match her horse against yours tomorrow for a mile. Winner takes the contract!"

Sam Cotton made the decision for him. "There's one I could go for! How about it, mister?"

Mark Dennis's face was marked with the lines of distrust and surprise. But all he could say was, "Heelfly will be ready. Eleven o'clock?"

"On the nose," Hugh nodded. "Better feed that hoss on dynamite, Dennis. We're keeping an eye on Little Sister this time."

Captain Johnny almost swallowed his fine-cut when he heard it. "Did I ask for a race?" he chortled. "By hokey, we'll run the plates off that

stud! Little Sister's acoming back, and New Mexico's going to know about it! I'm sleeping in the paddock with her tonight."

Later, when the mare was installed in her new quarters, they ate supper in front of the stall. At nine o'clock Hugh got up to go to the wagon where he had spread his blankets.

"You'd better let me bring you a tick of hay and sleep in front of the stall," he counseled Johnny. "A horse that's been mean once is never safe to take chances with."

"Don't you fret yourself 'bout Little Sister," said Captain Johnny. "She's so softhearted now she won't switch her tail at flies."

Those were the last words Hugh ever heard from the old man's lips. At midnight the sounds of kicking and squealing dragged him from his bed, but when he reached the paddock Captain Johnny was lying in a corner of the stall, dead, while Little Sister continued to kick at his limp body.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Racing Silks and Hot Lead

IT WAS a scene of horror Hugh would never forget. They had dragged the jockey out on the ground and covered him with a canvas. But in the yellow light of a lantern, while track followers clustered around, Hugh could see the brown-red stains coming through the tarpaulin, and he remembered the ghastly horseshoe mark on the Captain's face.

Barney Towne came from the hotel with Lass. Hugh and Mike leaned on the gate, looking in at the mare. She stood against the back wall, getting as far away from the odor of death as she could.

"I—I can't understand it!" Hugh muttered.

He was trying to keep from his mind the recollections that came bitterly to crowd it—days in the meadow with Johnny, working out Little Sister; times when they yarned of race horses before the fireplace on wintry nights; these and a thousand other memories of a gallant little old man who loved horses and won their love with understanding.

Barney Towne said huskily, beside him, "She never brought us nothing but grief, that filly. And she's done it for sure, this time. Won't a jockey in the county ride her now. Even if she could be mounted."

Hugh felt a tremor in Lass's body, as she pressed against him to look in at the mare. "I've ridden her—I'll ride her again. They aren't going to whip us this easily!"

Ice seemed to form along Hugh's spine. "Good Lord, no! She'll never wear a saddle again. She's a killer horse if one ever lived."

"I'm not afraid of her. She's never tried to hurt me."

"But if you'd seen the Captain as I did—"

Lass's eyes were narrow. "I don't think she did it. She's never kicked in her life!"

This mad idea of hers had Hugh breathless. "I tell you I saw her kicking him!" he retorted.

"Any horse would do it with a dead man in the stall with her. They can smell death. Captain Johnny might have been—stabbed, or something. Dennis thought we could never get a jockey to ride her if she'd killed a man.

But he was wrong!"

Mike's big hand fastened on the girl's shoulder. "I'm saying you aren't going to ride her!"

Lass pulled away and faced them angrily. "No, this is the end of it—Little Sister belongs to me, now. There's no rule against an owner riding her own horse. So if you don't want to see it, you'd better not be here eleven hours from now!"

That was far from the end of it, however. They started arguing again when she showed up for breakfast in the hotel dining-room. But at ten-thirty she was in the Snake-Track's old purple-and-white silks, snap-brimmed cap on her golden curls.

Hugh was the first one to approach the mare after the tragedy. She had gentled down completely, taking the snaffle bit without a fuss. He led her out. Lass stood by the gate, blanket and pad over her arm, quirt in her hand. Hugh watched her reach up and stroke the sorrel's neck. Little Sister bent her head and nuzzled in the girl's pocket for sugar, as she had done with Captain Johnny.

Lass's eyes went to him in relieved triumph. "A killer horse, is she?"

Hugh only wagged his head. There was a frowning wrinkle between his eyes. There were pieces in this puzzle that didn't fit.

A whistle blast rode the breeze to them. The track was cleared. Heelfly was being walked out by Santos Luna, his jockey, and a trainer. The stands, a jam of color, surged with excitement.

Lass looked up at Hugh, standing there frowning, hesitant. "Post time," she reminded him.

Suddenly Hugh gave Mike the reins. "Take her around, will you? I'll see you all later."

He watched them parade before the grandstand. Then the horses were saddled and Mike gave the girl a boost. This was the moment the crowd had been waiting for, and a dead silence blanketed the field. Little Sister walked down toward the turn. Hugh saw Lass wave at him.

Still he stood there before the empty stall. Presently the track was cleared again and they began maneuvering the horses for the start.

Abruptly, the starter's whistle shrilled and the horses broke away. That was when Hugh turned from the track, went to the back of the stall, and climbed the rear partition. In his ears was the swelling roar of hundreds of voices. But his attention was for Heelfly's empty stall.

He began crawling gingerly down the two-by-four partition. Twice he stopped and examined spots on the new wood. Reaching the stallion's stall, he dropped into the deep straw.

Now he began to grub around in the stuff. He had covered almost the whole space and was burrowing into a far corner when his hands struck it—a smooth length of hickory.

It had been an ordinary single-jack sledge hammer, until someone welded a racing-plate across the head of it. On that steel horseshoe there was brown blood, caked deep. *This* was the killer horse. This was the deadly tool that someone had carried from Heelfly's stall, down the partition to where Captain Johnny slept almost beneath the mare's hoofs.

That someone had struck the old man in the head, and the mare, terrified, had begun to kick at the limp thing that smelled of blood. Returning, the murderer had left splotches of

blood along the partition. And he had buried his bloody weapon where now it had been found.

Hugh turned to leave. It was then he saw Mark Dennis standing in the portal, a gun in his hand. Behind the Irishman loomed his son.

Hugh's move was reflex action. He sent the sledge hammer spinning into Dennis's face. Dennis ducked, firing as he did so. The slug splintered wood behind Hugh, giving him time to pull his own forty-four.

The murderer was thumbing his Colt again when Hugh's weapon came up. Lead burned deep through the muscles of his shoulder. Pain shook him, but his aim held steady. He saw Mark Dennis jerk as a bullet caved his ribs to find the heart.

Larry Dennis was running before his father's body hit the straw. Hugh stepped into the sunlight, gun held low. "All right, Dennis!"

Without slowing, his face showing over his shoulder, Larry Dennis thrust a gun barrel under his left arm pit and fired. The slug threw grit over Hugh's boots. Hugh's finger squeezed the trigger. Dennis came up on his toes, hands pressing against his thighs. Hugh Talbot turned away.

When he went back to Little Sister's stall, he could see them leading the mare across the field. Lass was running ahead of the horse, her cap off, blond hair tossing. When she reached him, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him.

"Oh, Hugh! Little Sister did it—by two lengths!"

"That—that's great!" Hugh tried to sound enthusiastic, but the girl pulled back and looked at him.

"Darling, what's wrong?"

Hugh lifted the sledge that leaned against the wall. "This. I found it in Heelfly's stall. Mark and Larry Dennis jumped me, and—I shot straighter. I guess somebody'd better get the law."

That night they sat long over their dinner. Alamo was returning to normal, with a long string of ranch wagons rattling back into the hills.

"If there's got to be a coroner's investigation," Mike Talbot told Hugh, "there'll be time to take that advice I gave you last week."

Lass shook her head. "If you're referring to what I think you are, I'm not going through with it. It's too risky. How would I look if your two began wrangling over who was going to give me away? One of you my legal father and the other my father-once-removed?"

"There'll be no wrangling," Barney Towne assured her. "That's a promise. Ain't either of us so anxious to lose you that we'll fight about it. In fact, I'd like to borrow the pair of you down to my place till after the Albuquerque show. I need a good bronc stomper to help shape up the bucking string I've promised Sam Cotton."

There was a little silence, all of them expecting Hugh to say something.

"I'll help all I can, Barney," he said at last, "but I've got another duty that comes first. There's an ornery, tobacco-chewing little hombre who'll be watching to see whether I let him down. I'm going to put his horse in shape for that Albuquerque show before I do anything else. And when she runs, I'll see him up there in the saddle, whispering things in her ear that only the two of them savvy. That's why Little Sister can't lose. Captain Johnny told me so himself."

THE END

TRICKY TRIPLETS

By S. Omar Barker

Horace Sylvester (Wup-Easy) Tate, better known as Tex, strikes old Shorty Davis as a fiddle-headed foofuraw so-and-so—but he makes a better impression on Shorty's wife Ella and the toothsome Davis triplets!

YESSIR, that's what this jasper says: "You seen a stray wife anywhere's around heah?"

Yessir, he comes ridin' up to where I'm sinkin' postholes for a new piece of fence, an' it galls my gizzard jest to view him.

I been punchin' cows since the first duck quacked, been ramroddin' my own spread long enough to wear out a Heiser saddle, an' I don't owe nobody a cent—outside of a mortgage at the Dry Fork Bank—but I ain't never paid over $19.30 for a pair of boots nor set on the tail of a silk shirt in my life.

I'm the unanimous president of the

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Skunk Valley School Board, Supreme Scratch of the Cattlemen's Cocklebur Association, and pappy to female triplets, but I ain't too proud to drip sweat into a posthole any day of the week, includin' Christmas, an' the sight of silver on a saddle sorter salts me. Specially when straddled by a silk-lined son of a shorthorn with nothin' better to do than set up there tryin' to smart-aleck a man when he's workin'. Another thing, I ain't but five foot four with my hair combed, an' most ever'body that ever called me "Shorty" had to swaller their cud mighty sudden—or else.

You'd think this feller was the wonderful wolf of the world the way he hooked fifteen dollars' worth of thirty-dollar pants around his silver-plated saddle horn an' built him a whiffer one-handed without even takin' off his glove.

"Howdy, shawt people," he drawls. "Cain't you make up yo' mind?"

"About what?" I snorts. "An' don't call me short people!"

"I mean about yo' diggin', shawt folks," he says. "Seems like quick as you git one hole goin' good you commence on another 'un. Nevuh git yo' well dug thataway."

"Ain't diggin' no well," I growls. "Ain't you never seen a posthole before?"

"Cain't say I have, shawt people," he grins. "All I evuh see is the earth surroundin' it!"

"Listen, Lochinvar," I says, "don't git brash or there'll be earth surroundin' you, includin' on top, only you won't be able to see it. You got any business with me, state it an' git!"

"Wup—easy, shawt folks!" he says. "You ain't got a stray wife hid out anywheres around heah, have you?"

"Wife?" I snorts. "Whose wife?"

"Mine," he says. "Ain't seen her, have you?"

"Ain't, an' ain't expectin' to!" I snorts, wavin' my shovel by way of closin' this crazy confab. Then it occurs to me if this jasper's wife has shore nuff run away from him, I ort to git her markin's so me an' my womenfolks can help her give him the slip if we git the chance.

"Hey, wait a minute!" I calls after him. "What sort of a lookin' female is she?"

"Damned if I know," he shrugs.

"Listen, Handsome Harry," I snorts, "talk sense to me or I'll empty your saddle with the flat side of this shovel! Don't you know what kind of a lookin' woman your own wife is?"

"Nope," he grins. "I ain't met her yet, shawt people. Y' see, it's my Aunt Zennie's notion. She made me promise I'd— Wup-easy! Maybe that's her a-comin' yonduh. Sho' rides purty, don't she, shawt people?"

"Never you mind how she rides, young feller," I says. "That there's my daughter, an' I ain't goin' to have no jingle-spur jasper like you makin' no—"

But I don't have time to git it said till here she is.

"Hi, Pop," she says, handin' me down a little stone jug. "If you're bound to bust your back diggin' postholes, you better take some nourishment. Here's your buttermilk. If I'd known you had company," she says, lookin' at this silver-plated jasper kinder admirin', like a fool gal will, "I'd have brought a cup."

"Don't need no cup," I says, purty sharp. "This jasper's in a hurry anyways!"

Only the dang fool don't leave an'

before I can forbid her, she turns to him.

"Don't mind Pop's manners," she says. "He thinks he's the hired man around here. I'm Ronnie Davis, and—"

"Mighty proud to meet you, gal people," busts in this jasper, sweepin' off his forty-dollar Stetson. "Will you marry me?"

Yessir, I must of throwed a little high, for the jug missed him, sailed on past an' come down with a glug-glug right between that dad-gooted bronc's front legs. I mean the sorrel—the one I hadn't noticed my other daughter, Lonnie, ridin' outa the brush. It might suit a man to poke a sudden jug between his front paws, but not a half-broke hoss, though I'd promised Lonnie I'd larrup the patches off'n her Levis if she didn't stay off them colts anyway.

'Course the bronc come unshucked, with all them open postholes for him to throw a foot into and chances ten to nothin' he'd fall an' bust Lonnie's neck, so I hollered to her godsakes to git down offa there, but she let in to give him a ridin', an' I started to run for the ruckus, aimin' to wham that sorrel acrost the face with the flat of my shovel an' knock some of the salt out of him, but seems like I slogged a forefoot into one of them postholes myownself, an' I must of bonged my noggin on the shovel. For the next thing I knowed I didn't know nothin'.

I come to with this jingle-spur jasper standin' over me, sloshin' buttermilk in my face. I didn't much like it an' I told him so in two syllabubs.

"You," I says, "git!"

"Git married?" he grins.

"Why, you impident skewbald skunk!" I commences but he sloshes my face full of buttermilk again.

"Wup-easy, shawt people!" he says. "Remembuh you're my fewtchuh pappy-in-law!"

"Future pappy-in-hell!" I snorts.

"Besides," puts in my daughter Ronnie, "I'm not goin' to marry you or any other such idiot!"

"Ain't no other such, gal people," he grins. Then he turns to my other daughter, Lonnie. "But I've got to marry somebody. How about you, bronc folks?"

My daughter Lonnie's steel-gray eyes looks him coldly up an' down like she was countin' the bugs on him.

"I was makin' a ride of it, wasn't I?" she says. "Why did you have to come heroin' up and drag me off?"

So he'd rescued her, had he? Well, that was somethin'—but not much, considerin' him causin' all the ruckus in the first place.

"You avoid the question, iceberg people," he says. "Seems to me I was inquirin' the prospects of matrimony."

"You're a crazy fool!" stomps Lonnie.

"Nothin' else but!" the jasper agrees. "But I promised my Aunt Zennie I'd—"

"Zoony on you an' your Aunt Zennie!" I snorts, gettin' a bellyful of this fool talk. "Ronnie, fetch me my gun off'n the saddle! I'll learn this skewbald skunk that when ol' man Davis says git he means go yonder!"

"Never mind," says my daughter Lonnie, "I've got mine handy!"

No sooner did than done, she pulls her little ol' .38 an pokes it in the face of this silk-shirted nuisance. We're a tough breed, us Davises.

"Vamoose!" she says.

"If you blow in it jest right it sawtuh whistles," he says, bright as sun-

rise on a new tin roof. "Steady now, an' I'll show you."

An' I be dad-gooted if he don't step right up to that .38, pucker his lips against the muzzle, an' start blowin' down the barrel. 'Course Lonnie ain't really been aimin' to shoot him an' kinder splatter things.

"Y' see, gun folks?" drawls this jasper. "Marry me an' you'll nevuh lack foh amazement."

Meantimes Ronnie is helpin' me up, only seems like my off knee gives way when I try to step over there an' yank this jasper loose from his hurraw.

"Ow!" I groans. "I've busted a dad-gooted leg!"

"Tsk! Tsk!" offers this jasper. "Better unsaddle him, gal people. Looks like we got to shoot him!"

Y' know, that dang Bo Bummer had some shore-nuff muscle hid out under all them fancy duds, for in spite of me only missin' four outa five pokes at his nose, he picks me up like a bog rider h'istin' a newborned calf an' steps acrost his hoss with me.

"This here beef's ready to skin, gal folks," he drawls. "Whichaway's the waggin?"

"The house is just over the hill yonder," says my daughter Ronnie, lookin' at him in kinder of a subdood voice. "We better take him there."

That's how come we let this lunatic git into my house. Yessir, I said lunatic, because he ain't no more'n carried me in an' throwed me on the bed than he turns to my wife.

"Ixcuse me if I'm sawtuh previous, lady folks," he drawls, "but if it turns out we got to shoot him, will you marry me—aftuh the funeral, of co'se?"

But you cain't faze my wife Ella.

"Why, yes," she says, "I might—if you cain't get nobody else to change your diapers for you! What happened to you, Pa, you get mad an' kick yourself?"

"I wish I could," I groans, "for not takin' a shovel to this kiote the first time he yapped! Ow-ouch!"

"Better git a rope, lady folks," says this jasper. "Ain't nothin' ails him but a sprung hook, but looks like we'll have to hawg him down an' go to work on it."

If my wife Ella hadn't grabbed me by the ears an' helt me down, I believe he'd of done it, too. As it was all he done was take my hurt leg, tie a double bow knot in it, an' then yank till I hollered like a run-over pup.

"Shut up, shawt people," he says. "I want to hear this hock joint pop."

Hear it? My daughter Connie, the third one of them female triplets I mentioned, the blue-eyed one with kinder red hair, heard it clean out at the what-yuh-ma-call-it an' come a-runnin'. She's a great gal for readin' books, Connie, like "The Three Musky Steers," "Twenty Thousand Legs Under the Sea" an' all them hifalutin' fables.

"Zounds!" she cries, bustin' into the room all agig an' agog. "Who's shot?"

"Nobody, red-top people," says this jasper before anybody else can answer. "Shawt folks, here, just loped into a posthole and sprung a hock. But he'll be up an' around in time for the weddin'."

"What wedding?" she inquires, settin' on the bed to sorter soothe my fevered brow.

"Ours," he drawls, fetchin' out his prayer book to build him a whiffer. "Ain't you goin' to marry me?"

Nossir, you can't faze my daughter Connie.

"Well, it's an idea, anyhow," she says, lookin' him over as calm as last year's Christmas. "Have you been through the sixth grade?"

For the first time, this jasper looks kinder dazed.

"Wup-easy!" he says finally. "You mean your husband's got to have the education?"

"I mean," says my daughter Connie, "that they won't hold school in this district unless there's ten pupils sixth grade or under, and I'm one pupil short. I want that teacher's job so bad I'd just about marry you to get it."

"But listen, Connie," I interlopes from my bed of pain an' mizry, "that wouldn't help none fer *this* year. After all, y' know, raisin' a family takes time, an'—"

"I don't mean that, Dad," she says, blushin' right smart, but plumb determined jest the same. "I mean suppose I make a bargain with this—er—gentleman. I'll promise to marry him if he'll promise to enroll in my school to make the tenth pupil. You know I've always longed to be a teacher, Dad!"

"Connie," says my wife, Ella, "ain't you ashamed!"

"Daughter," I says, "you been readin' another one of them books. I'm a-notion to spank you!"

"Nonsense, Dad!" scoffs Connie. Then she turns to this jasper who's slipped over by the door like he had half a notion to make a run for it. "Well?" she inquiries. "Is it a hoss trade, Romeo?"

"Oh, my!" he kinder groans. "If you only knowed what I look like in short pants!"

"Like a goof!" snuffs my daughter Ronnie.

"Like a goof!" snuffs my daughter Lonnie.

"I hope you got handsomer knees than Pa's!" says my wife Ella.

"Like the dad-gooted gillygaloo bird that you are!" I snorts. "Listen, one an' all, this dumb foolishness has went far enough! This here's a cow ranch, not no lunatic farm! I'm the boss around here, an' what I says goes—"

"In one ear an' out the other, Shorty," says my wife Ella. "Connie's free, white, an' twenty-one, ain't she?"

"Supposin' she is?" I hollers. "I'm her daddy, an' I'm a cowman, an' I wear patched pants, an' I got galluses—I mean calluses—on my hands that ain't never tucked in the tail of a silk shirt all my sweatin', saddle-sore life! You think I'm gonna lay here an' let a daughter of mine calmly git engaged to a pair of forty-dollar boots an' pink silk shirt that wouldn't know which end of a cow the tail's on if it was to switch him in the face? A fiddle-headed foofuraw son of a—"

"Wup-easy, shawt people," busts in this jasper. "I ain't nevuh been fiddle-haided enough to throw my foot in an open posthole. So if you'll jest wrastle yourself down for a minute, I'll kindly discuss this proposition of the gal people yonduh an' see if we can settle the details. Which'll it be, red-top people: the weddin' first an' the schoolin' to folluh or vicey, as the sayin' is, reversey?"

"I think," says my daughter Connie, kinder stiff in the neck all of a sudden, "the schooling had better come first—long enough for you to learn to quit calling me 'red-top people,' anyway!"

"O.K., red-top folks," drawls this jasper, makin' her a bow, but lookin' kinder worried jest the same. "An' is there a mailbox anywheres hereabouts?"

"Half a mile east," says my daugh-

ter Ronnie, "an' here's the catalog."

"Cattylog?"

"Sure," said Ronnie, sourcastic, "aren't you going to order you some short pants, schoolboy people?"

"Maybe I can borry a pair—if anybody around here wears 'em," he grins. "Nope, I got to write to my Aunt Zennie. I promised to let her know *muy pronto* when I'd made the crossin'."

"You ain't made it yit, young feller," I warns him. "An' what's your Aunt Zennie got to do with it?"

"Didn't I tell you, shawt people?" he drawls. "She's the one with the money. But right now, ixcuse me a minute an' I'll go tend to my hoss."

"So," I says to my daughter Connie after this jasper goes out, "you shore skun the wolf, didn't you? Marryin' a feller whose name you don't even know!"

"I haven't married him—yet," says my daughter Connie.

"At least we know he's got an aunt named Zennie," sighs my wife Ella. "An' he is *tall*, an' handsome!"

"He wears mighty nice clothes," sighs my daughter Ronnie. "And he asked me first!"

"Did you see the way he looked at me when I drew the gun on him?" sighs my daughter Lonnie.

Yessir, that's what I git for daddyin' female triplets. The damned-fooler a feller is, the more they take on over him. An' me laid up to where I cain't even git out an' dig postholes!

This jasper don't come back till supper time. Here I was, runnin' my little ranch without no cowhands, except jest me an' the daughters, because seem like ever' cowboy I hired spent more time buildin' up to a son-in-law than what he done on the work. An' now that I'm laid up with a sprung hock an' could shore nuff make use of a man, this silk-lined son of a sawbuck hides out till it's time to eat.

"Where the dad-goot you been?" I inquires of him. "You ain't boardin' here for your health. No work, no eat!"

"Please pass the biskits, shawt people," he drawls. "Fillin' up postholes sho' is appetizin'."

My wife Ella not only passes him the biskits, but butters him a hot one—which is more'n she ever done for me.

"Fillin' up postholes?" I snorts. "After me bustin' my back diggin' 'em, you mean you been—"

"Fillin' 'em up," he busts in, calm as last year's Christmas. "You take a lot of open postholes like that, an' some ol' geezuh's li'ble to step in 'em an' spring a hock. I sawtuh considered it my duty to fill 'em up, shawt people."

Yessir, that was the straw that downed the dromedary, as the sayin' is. I keep a .45 strapped to the table leg to welcome chuck-line riders with, so now I haul it out in the righteousness of my wrath, an' throw down on this jasper with it, givin' him plenty plain powders to git up an' git before I sorter consider it my duty to shoot his ears off.

But shucks, you cain't do nothin' with a feller that calmly grabs the hawgleg outa your hand an' stirs his coffee with it.

"By the way, Davis people," he says, "now that I'm the main posthole fillupper around here, maybe I bettuh interduce myself. My maiden name is Horace Sylvester Tate, but the first one that calls me anything but Tex, it'll cost 'em a kiss."

"Have a hot biskit, HORACE!" I snorts. "An' what you gonna do about it?"

"Funny how I git these sudden deaf spells, ain't it?" he says. "What did your father say, Miss Connie?"

"He said 'have a hot biskit, *Horace*,'" busts in my daughter Ronnie.

"And some lick on it, *Brother Sylvester*," says my daughter Lonnie.

Well, I reckon they had it comin' to 'em.

My daughter Connie just looks at her plate and don't say nothing.

So next day she opens school over in Skunk Valley, and when she comes ridin' home by herself that evenin' she looks kinder drawed around the gills.

"Well, daughter," I says, "at last you're a schoolteacher."

"Yes," she says.

"Ten scholars?" I inquires.

"Yes," she says.

"Behave good?" I offers.

"Yes," she says, but kinder hezumtates.

"You see Lonnie anywheres with that bronc she's schoolin' out?"

"Yes," she says.

"She come by the schoolhouse?"

"Yes," she says.

"Extra hoss with her?"

"Yes," she says. "What of it?"

"Oh, nothin'," I soothes her. "Didn't whatsizname ride home with you?"

"Why should he?" she says. "I wish I'd never laid eyes on him! It's bad enough, a grown man like him coming to school in knee pants without acting the fool about it!"

"I wouldn't call it *actin'*," I says. "What-all did he do?"

"It was bad enough," she sniffles, "to have a grown man like him asking to be excused, then when he didn't come back I sent the Tolliver boy out to see what was the matter and he found Horace Sylvester Tate sitting out there under a juniper mending a stirrup leather for—for a girl."

"Well, at least he wasn't fillin' up postholes," I soothes her. "An' ondoubtless these nester gals' saddles do need mendin'."

"This one didn't," snaps my daughter Connie. "And it wasn't a nester girl—it was Ronnie! Whuh-whuh—what does he think he is," she purt near blubbers, "a Mormon?"

"Maybe you better ask him," I advises. "Here he comes, now."

Yessir, yonder he come, strollin' up from the corrals with my daughter Lonnie hangin' on one arm an' my daughter Ronnie on the other. Ackshully, the way my womenfolks is takin' on over this jasper I wouldn't be surprised to see my wife Ella come trailin' along hangin' onto his shirt tail. All except my daughter Connie.

"The imbecile!" she snaffles, being some hifalutin' cuss word she's snagged out of a book, an' provin' that one of my daughters, anyways, has got some sense, even if she is a schoolteacher.

I crutch over to the winder an' holler out at him.

"Fer the last time, feller!" I shouts. "I'm tellin' you to straddle your hoss an' git!"

Seems like he recognized the bark of the wolf this time, for the last thing I see of him a few minutes later, he's on his bronc, foggin' up the draw.

But about an hour after dark here he is agin, stompin' into the house like he owned it, an' my wife Ella an' my daughter Ronnie an' my daughter Lonnie runnin' circles around theirselves to warm him up some supper. But my daughter Connie jest grabs her a book an' goes to readin' in the livin'-room, an' the more she hears 'em laughin' out in the kitchen, the faster an' furi-

ouser she reads.

After while he comes wanderin' in, rollin' him a smoke.

"Evenin', teacher people," he says, but she don't even look up.

"Evenin', sorrel folks," he greets her agin, an' she jest goes on readin'.

"An' jest to think," he drawls, comin' over to stand behind her chair, "I've went an' promised my heart an' hand to a deaf woman!"

"Oh, shut up!" says my daughter Connie. "Can't you see I'm reading?"

"Let's set out on the porch awhile an' talk about what we're gonna do with the money!" he says.

Now money is a word that always kinder raises my ears.

"Money?" I says.

"Sho' nuff," he says. "You don't think o' Tex Tate would be marryin' a red-haired schoolmarm that reads with her book upside down for anything else, do you?"

I'd always figgered my daughter Connie was smart, but that's the first I'd knowed she could read upside down. Yessir, the education is wonderful, because she kep' right on readin' it that way.

"Marryin' into my family fer money," I says, sourcastic, "is about like shearin' a snake for wool."

"You been misincubated, shawt people," he says. "I mean my Aunt Zennie's money. Oughta 'mount to fifty thousand, maybe a little less, time we've paid the preachuh."

"What are you talking about?" inquires my daughter Connie, layin' down her book like a bartender bouncin' a beer mug on a bar.

"Me, you, an' my Aunt Zennie," drawls this jasper. "An' the money she promised to me if I'd quit the rodeos and marry some honest, hard-workin' ranch gal. So I promised her I'd light out acrost country in my best bib an' tuckuh, an' propose matrimony to evuh ranch gal I come onto till one of 'em taken me up. You was the seventeenth since I left Texas last month, not countin' a sheepman's widow I sawtuh side-stepped down on the Salado. So, quick as you git yo' bellyful of —ixcuse me, ma'am, I mean quick as you weary of schoolmarmin', we'll git some ol' preachuh to throw the hitch an' call on Aunt Zennie to pay off, an' I'll buy you some books that's already printed upside down, so you can go on with yo' readin'."

"Tex, my boy," I says, right cordial, "speakin' as a man with a mortgage that could use a little liftin', that makes it different. If I'd knowed—"

"I'll say it makes it different," puts in my daughter Connie. "You're surely not dumb enough to think I'd marry a man for his aunt's money, are you?"

"Well," he grins, "I ain't too dumb to reconnize that you've got a couple o' mighty peert an' purty sisters out in the kitchen."

Well, sir, believe it or chaw chittlin's, this jasper kep' right on goin' to school jest the same. Claimed he'd promised to be a pupil to my daughter Connie, an' he aimed to do it, regardless. She claims he's plumb underminin' the cause of eddication, on account that mostly what he does at school is ask to be ixcused as quick as roll call's over, an' if she ixcuses him he climbs on his hoss an' skiyoots off some place, an' if she don't he keeps the kids in a lather all the time laughin' at the answers he gives. Like when she tells him to name four products of the state of Texas, he says him an' three other hoss thieves. And what was Sam Hous-

ton noted for, he says the hair on his chest, an' sech.

Not to mention runnin' in a bunch of my cattle one recess an' stagin' a rodeo durin' which my daughter Connie gits so wrothy that she kinder forgits she's a schoolmarm an' climbs her pony, aimin' to learn him a lesson by droppin' a loop on him whilst he's ridin' a steer backwards, only she throws too big a loop an' it ketches both him an' the steer an' her pony won't stand, an' if it wasn't for my daughter Lonnie an' my daughter Ronnie comin' along about then to help her turn 'em loose, him an' that ol' steer might of wrastled theirselves to death.

But what worries me is what this jasper is doin' them times when he gits ixcused an' is gone all day, because I've got quite a few late calves that ain't been branded yet, an' seems to me like I can smell burnt hair on him sometimes when he comes in of a night. An' sometimes when him an' my daughter Lonnie has gone out to watch the moonrise over the mesa, or he's playin' the mouth-harp to my daughter Ronnie out on the porch, I kinder mention my suspicions to my wife Ella.

"Now Pa," she always says, "jest because you used to drag a long loop yourself ain't no sign this pore boy's a thief."

"No," says my daughter Connie, "he hasn't got sense enough to steal beans with the bag open!"

But I keep remindin' myself that fifty thousand dollars an' no sense ain't such bad qualifications fer a son-in-law. O' course, all this time I'm laid up to where I cain't ride, an' I git to thinkin' purty bitter about all them postholes that needs diggin', all the fence waitin' to build, them late calves that needs brandin', bogs that needs ridin', water holes to be cleaned out, an' the goldenrod to be cut an' burnt before the frost makes pizen out of it—my little spread plumb goin' to hell, in fact, an' nothin' I can do about it. Because here's my daughter Connie too busy teachin' school, an' my daughter Lonnie an' my daughter Ronnie too dang preoccupied playin' up to this Tex jasper to be of any use any more, seems like, an' no money to hire a hand with an' no hands to hire if there was; an' this silver-plated dingo feedin' fat at my table an' never turnin' his hand at anything but polishin' his boots; an' how do I know but he's lyin' about his Aunt Zennie promisin' him all that money to git married?

I tell you I'm as worried as a stump-tailed bull in fly time, an' all because this jasper comes along when he did an' caused me to step in a posthole lookin' for a wife. I mean him lookin' for a wife. Me, I done got one.

So I bunch her one evenin' with them triplet daughters of mine an' kinder lays down the law.

"About this here marryin' business," I says. "I ain't askin' 'ary daughter of mine to sell her birthday for a mess of pot likker, as the Good Book says, but that mortgage'll be due at the bank next month, an' a son-in-law with fifty thousand smackers ain't to be snuz at. It's time fer you gals to either fish or cut bait!"

"Why, Pa!" says my wife Ella.

"Gimme another week," grins my daughter Lonnie, "an' I'll sure have my loop on him!"

"If I don't land the poor fish sooner," giggles my daughter Ronnie. "I can see him weakenin' every day!"

My daughter Connie don't say nothing.

Right then this Tex Tate comes bustin' in hisownself. He's been to the mailbox an' there's a letter stickin' up about halfway out of a hip pocket.

"Evenin'," he says, kinder sober for him. He stands there a minute rollin' him a whiffer, then he blows a puff an' says:

"You-all been mighty kind to a maverick, Davis people, feedin' my tapeworm, schoolin' me an' all, an' I'm so grateful I wish I was a Mormon so I could marry all three of these gal folks. But bein' as I ain't, I'll now be tellin' you *adios*."

"But you cain't go so sudden, Tex," protests my wife Ella. "You got socks in the wash!"

"What's yo' hurry, long people?" drawls my daughter Lonnie, imitatin' the way he talks. "There's a moonrise in about an hour!"

"Sure," says my daughter Ronnie. "Stick around till spring an' we'll crown you queen of the May!"

My daughter Connie jest looks up at him once an' don't say nothing. I recollect the time my wife Ella looked at me thataway an' I didn't have sense enough to run. For a minute I figger this jasper hain't, either, for he hezumtates at the door, givin' me a chance to put in my two bits' worth.

"Fifty thousand dollars is a heap of money, son," I says, "jest for gittin' married—an' maybe undiggin' them postholes of mine you filled up."

"Damn money an' damn postholes!" he snorts. Then he kinder gazes at my daughter Connie an' gulps.

"Miss Connie," he says, "if you got anything to add to the general goodbys, I'll be waitin' a minute—out on the porch."

I wouldn't of thunk she would of went, but she did.

It wasn't for the purpose of eavesdroppin' that I snuck into the dinin'-room right quick an' poked my left crutch with a bent pin stuck in the rubber on the end of it out the open window, but I couldn't help hearin' 'em.

"Sorry I've acted the damn fool, Miss Connie," he says, twirlin' his hat. "Of course you unduhstand I didn't really mean it, askin' you to marry me so sudden thataway, an' now—"

"Why, that's all right, Mr. Tate," busts in my daughter Connie. "We were both just joking, weren't we?"

Well, I snagged that letter out of his pocket with my crutch all right, but kinder slipped an' bumped my knee, an' it made me cuss, an' my daughter Connie says, "Good-by, Mr. Tate," an' comes back in the house mighty sudden like she thought somebody was eavesdroppin' on 'em.

She goes right in her room an' slams the door, an' purty soon I hear the *buppity-bup-bup* of this jasper's horse goin' yander with him. Have you ever set an' listened to fifty thousand dollars lopin' away up the draw an' nothin' you can do about it?

Next mornin' when my wife Ella got up to build the fire was the first private chance I got to look at that letter I'd swiped. It was from his Aunt Zennie all right. It says:

Dear Sylvester: The deal is off. Just got married myself. When a gent marries an old gal like me for my money I figure he's entitled to it. Here's five dollars. That's all you'll get from me except

Love and kisses,
AUNT ZENOBIA.

So that's why he'd skun out so sudden: no money, no marry. The scrub!

"We'll miss him around here," sighs my wife Ella over the pancakes.

"I won't," I says, "if I ever git a shot at him!" But I don't mention the letter to her.

"Lonnie," I says, "you an' Ronnie saddle up some horses. Now that we're shed of your little pokey-dot playmate, you gals are gittin' out on the work agin—an' I'm goin' with you. If I ain't able to ride now I never will be."

"You never was—much," observes my wife Ella. "Not graceful like Tex."

Nossir, I don't know why them gals hadn't told me. First I ride by to cuss them postholes this jasper had filled up. They was filled up all right—*with fence posts*, with the wire strung on 'em neat an' solid.

"Hell," I snorts, "who done this?"

"You guess," says my gal daughters.

Yessir, everywheres we rode the ranch work was all done up slick, calves branded, water holes cleaned, windmills fixed—even the goldenrod cut an' burnt. That's what he'd been doin' all them times he got ixcused from school. It sure surprised me.

"Great gugglin' gosh!" I groans. "A feller like that, me with three gal daughters, an' they let him git away!"

"That's what you think," says my daughter Lonnie.

"Or else I can't read tracks," giggles my daughter Ronnie.

Well, I can kinder read sign myownself, an' here's the tracks of this jasper's hoss, travelin' at a lope, plumb fresh.

"Last one to ketch him's an old maid!" hollers my daughter Lonnie, giggin' her pony to a run.

I ain't able to ride fast myself. The last I see of 'em, they're ridin' neck an' neck over the hill *toward the schoolhouse.*

When I git there school's done out, but my daughter Connie's hoss is still there, an' so's Tex Tate's. My other two daughters is peekin' in the window, gigglin'.

"Psst, Pap!" whispers my daughter Lonnie. "Come here if you want a peek at a cowboy gettin' the education!"

"I knew we'd bring her around," giggles my daughter Ronnie, "if we just kept pretendin' to sweetheart him ourselves long enough! Come here, Pop! We'll give you a boost!"

I may be short folks, but I ain't the kind to go peekin' through a window at a pore hard-workin' cowboy gittin' the mitten frum my own daughter. Nossir, I walk right up to the front door an' squint through the keyhole.

All I can see over the desks is Tex Tate's silk shirt, but I know he's been ridin' hard an' fast, an' there ain't no more doubts in my mind about him bein' a genuwine cowhand, for the tail of it is out. Near as I can make out, looks like he's got his arms around somethin'. It's a mighty sweetsome scene.

Then all of a sudden I remember that letter from his Aunt Zennie an' my dooty as a parent flies right up an' smacks me in the face.

"Hold ever'thing!" I proclaims, bustin' in plumb extemporaneous.

"I'm sho' tryin' to, pappy-in-law people!" grins ol' Tex right apast my daughter Connie's blushin' ear.

"But hey, Connie!" I hollers. "Do you realize this jasper ain't got a cent?"

"You think I'd get this close to him if he had?" she blushes.

"But I don't mean s-c-e-n-t," I expostugates. "I mean this here letter from his Aunt Zennie. It says here that he—"

Yessir, I reach in my pockit for it, an' it ain't there, an' all of a sudden here's my wife Ella slidin' off a plumb wore-out hoss an' bargin' up to the door.

"Try to keep a secrit from your lawful wedded wife, will you, Shorty?" she says. "I like to rode myself to death!"

I'm tempted to tell her she ort to rode the hoss instid of herself, but I know my wife Ella.

"Gosh, sugar-honey," I says, "you don't mean—"

"I mean I wasn't goin' to let no nice boy like Tex run off with a busted heart jest because he thought you thought he thought Connie thought he was wantin' to marry her jest for money. So quick as you left an' I read his Aunt Zennie's letter that I'd slipped out of your pockit at breakfast, I saddled ol' Booge an' took out after him to tell him to come on back. I wouldn't of caught him, though, if he hadn't already started back hisownself because he'd got to thinkin' that maybe she thought he thought she thought he—"

"Wup-easy, wife people!" I drawls, haulin' her back outside an' closin' the door. "Let's you an' me go dig postholes—cain't you see school's goin' on?"

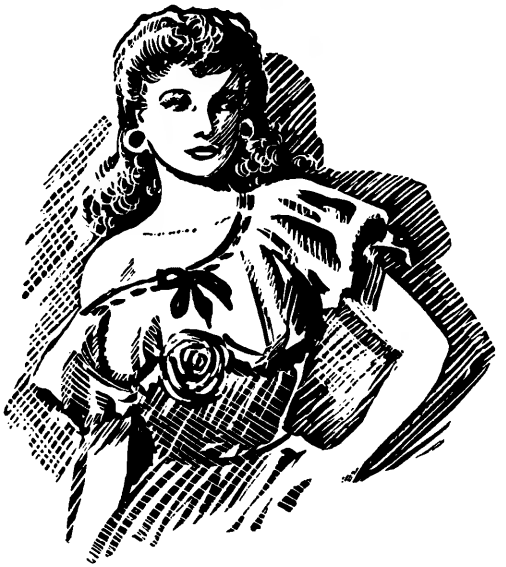
FRONTIER STRIPTEUSE

THE ENTERTAINER who could capture the fancy of an audience in the halcyon days of Virginia City's prosperity stood a good chance of leaving a considerable fortune when she died. One who succeeded was the famous Ada Menken, who in the glorious 1860's cavorted upon the stage of the city's most popular theater. No one will claim that la Menken was the first strip-teaser, since this pleasant art was probably practiced centuries before her time; but she seems to have been the first to attain fame in this country.

Those who do not recall the name may remember seeing in volumes of Americana the poster of Ada, tied to the back of a black stallion, perched on the edge of a cliff. Ada was clad in a filmy garment which clung faithfully to her, fastened in some way that defied male understanding. The poster was a fairly accurate representation of her act. No simple walking across a stage, divesting clothing to the accompaniment of a provocative drum; no vulgar "bumps" and "grinds" for this artist. She enacted a little drama, being held up by bandits on the highway, and having her clothing torn from her, after which the villains lashed her to the horse and the handsome animal made his way up a zigzagging ramp which eventually carried the lovely Menken out of sight of her admirers.

It was the cheerful custom of those admirers to show their appreciation of art by showering gold and silver on the stage, and it is probably safe to say that not even the highest paid of today's strippers could match pioneer Menken's earnings.

—DALE ROBERTSON



BALLAD OF A YALLER-HAIRED GAL

By Virginia Moody Hagan

HERE comes Sally with the wagon train,
Here comes Sal to the wide-open West;
St. Looie gal in a man's domain,
Here comes Sal in a calico dress.

Give them hosses the rawhide whips!
Spin them wheels through the soft black dirt;
Here comes Sally of the ruby lips,
Dance gal comin' in a ruffled skirt!

Up comes lumbering Big Jim Connors,
Brown hair curlin' and a gleam in his eye;
"Move aside, gents, while I do the honors
For Sally with eyes like a Texas sky!"

Pinched-in waist and a dimple in her cheek,
White arms brushin' a velvet hood,
Yaller curls bob as she jumps to the shriek:
"Gee-roosalem Chrismus, a woman looks good!"

"Hey, thar, somebuddy, strike up a tune;
Rosin up your fiddle bow, Tennessee;
Come along, folks, to the Silver Saloon,
Come along, pardner, drinks on me!

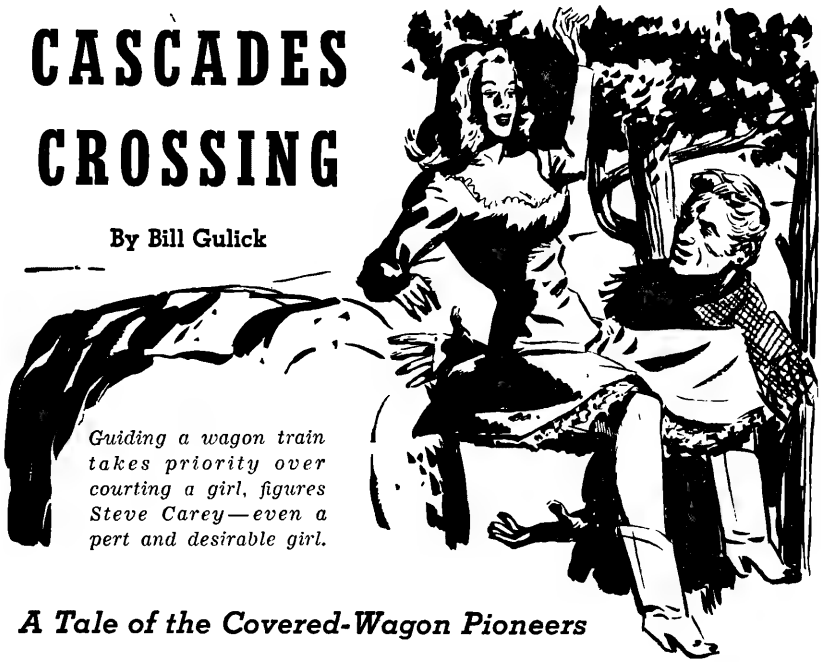
"Lift that Sally-gal up on the bar!
Lookit her dance with 'er slim ankles showin'!
Listen to her sing to Billy's git-tar,
Loud an' clear like a norther blowin'!"

There stands Big Jim up in the front,
Gleam in his eye that ain't like a brother's,
Bronze as an Injun on a buffalo hunt—
Tellin' us *we* can have all the others!

Wagon train comin' with *Texas or Bust;*
Yonder waits Jim and his bride, named Sal;
Rawhide them hosses through the Texas dust!
Help us forgit that yaller-haired gal!

CASCADES CROSSING

By Bill Gulick



Guiding a wagon train takes priority over courting a girl, figures Steve Carey—even a pert and desirable girl.

A Tale of the Covered-Wagon Pioneers

LONG ago Steve Carey's pappy had told him that there came a time when a man had ought to speak up and a time when he'd ought to keep his lip buttoned and wait. Hunkering near the fire with the shadows of the circled wagons around him, he tried to look indifferent while the Illinois men argued over the news he had brought them, though impatience crawled under his buckskins like a batch of newly hatched fleas. This, he reckoned, was one of these waiting times.

Beside him, Big Bird grunted, "Too much talk. We go."

"We wait," Steve said.

"Listen," the Indian persisted, "this Jim Ebling is a bad man. I know him. Two summers ago he came to trade with my people, offering them the water that takes away an Indian's mind for their furs. The chiefs told him to go away or they would kill him, and he went. Now he is with these people. We go."

"He's only their guide. We wait."

The Indian lapsed into gloomy silence. The girl, Eloise Lewis, came out of the shadows and sat down near the fire, her black head bent toward the light as she pretended to sew. Steve guessed that she was doing more listening than sewing. She looked like that kind. Inquisitive. Saucy.

He tried to keep his eyes off her but didn't have much luck at it, and of a sudden she glanced up and caught him staring at her.

"Had your supper?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am. An hour ago."

"Then why are you looking at me like you wanted to eat me?"

He reddened and dropped his gaze, half ashamed and half angry. He wished he could grab hold of her and shake her good. The blood pounded hard through his temples as he covertly looked at her. Trouble was, shaking her likely would be the last thing he'd think of doing once he got his hands on her.

The argument among the men seemed to be petering out. Daniel Lewis, Eloise's father and the wagon captain, rubbed his chin.

"We're right back where we started."

"Good!" grunted the guide, Jim Ebling. "Then we'll follow the Columbia, like we'd planned."

Lewis turned and looked at Steve. "There seems to be a disagreement. You say there's a wagon road across the Cascades. Ebling says there isn't. Which one of you am I to believe?"

"There's a road," Steve said.

A dark, heavy man, Ebling got to his feet. "You calling me a liar?"

Steve also rose. He stood half a head taller than the guide, a blond, blue-eyed young man with a habit of keeping his voice level and low after the way of one who has lived much of his life in country where one learns by listening, not by talking.

"There's a road," he repeated.

Ebling's eyes measured the rawhide leanness of him, the young hardness of him, and he didn't seem too eager to carry the argument beyond words.

"Well?" Lewis said.

Ebling spat into the fire. "I said there wasn't any wagon road that I *knew* of. I still say it. 'Course, if you want to take the word of a stranger against mine, that's your funeral."

"The Indian backs him up."

"Give an Injun a dollar and he'll tell you anything you want to hear."

Big Bird's eyes glittered. He touched Steve's arm and muttered, "We go!"

Might as well, Steve thought bitterly. This wasn't the first time his word had been doubted. All the other emigrant trains that had come through Walla Walla that summer had been as skeptical and as reluctant to try the new road as this one was.

"Big Bird's no liar and neither am I," he said angrily. "The road is there. It was halfway up the west side of the mountains when I left Olympia two months ago and it should be well over the pass by now.

"You people say you're looking for timber country to settle in. Follow me to Olympia and I'll show you trees like you never saw before. Go down the Columbia to Portland and you won't be able to fell one without dropping it on a settler who's already laid claim to the land. You say you want to set up a sawmill close to salt water so you can ship lumber back East. Come to Olympia and you can roll your trees right down into the Sound. Go to Portland and you'll still be a hundred miles from the sea."

"My goodness!" Eloise said, looking up from her sewing. "You're a convincing talker when you get started!"

"Be quiet, Eloise!" Lewis scolded. He frowned at Steve. "You said the settlers themselves were building the road. I can't understand why they'd go to all that trouble."

"Because Olympia needs people," Steve said doggedly. "There's going to be a state north of the Columbia some day—a state bigger and better and richer than Oregon ever thought of being—and Olympia's going to be its capital. To get people, we had to build the road."

"It don't make sense," Ebling said.

No, Steve admitted, it didn't make sense. It was one of those fool dreams that ambitious men in new lands sometimes have, dreams that usually are not realized. In the beginning the government had promised help on the road, sending a young captain by the name of McClellan out to the territory to survey a route from tide level across the Cascades to Fort Walla Walla.

McClellan had taken a party of engineers and gone a few miles up the western slope of the Cascades, and then, because he was indifferent, lazy, or just a plain fool, he had accepted an irresponsible Indian's word that building a wagon road across Naches Pass was impossible because of deep, year-round snows. Returning to the Sound, he wrote a report to that effect, and the government forgot the matter.

But the settlers in Olympia did not forget. They said it *could* be done, and, just to show their contempt for the deep-snow myth, they sent Steve Carey across the pass and back in late December, on foot and alone. When he made the journey without difficulty, nothing would do the settlers but to build the wagon road themselves the following spring.

Steve had helped. He had felled timber in the cold spring rain, he had driven yokes of straining oxen as they hauled the big trees away, he had seen the road eat its way up the slopes toward the crest of the pass there under the immense snow-capped shoulder of The-Mountain-That-Was-God.

In mid-summer, with the road progressing nicely, he and Big Bird had ridden to Fort Walla Walla on the main emigrant trail, hoping to divert some of the wagon trains northwestward to Olympia. So far he had failed. Summer was gone now and before long snow would fly, closing the pass to wagons until spring came. He turned away.

"I reckon there's nothing more to say. Come on, Big Bird."

Suddenly Eloise Lewis sprang up. "Pa, I believe him."

"Now, Eloise—"

"Well, I do! I think we ought to go to Olympia like he says."

"What makes you so sure he's telling the truth?" Ebling demanded.

She studied Steve's face, then tossed her head. "Because he's got nice eyes. Pa, we're going to Olympia."

"Well, we could take a vote—"

"Bother the vote!" The girl whirled and spoke to the men gathered round. "Pa and I are going over the mountains to Olympia with Mr. Carey. Those that want to can come with us; those that don't can go down the river to Portland."

She turned and smiled at Steve. "There, that's settled. We'll start in the morning."

The power of a strong-minded woman, Steve marveled, was a wonderful and a frightening thing. Of the forty wagons in the train, every last one of them decided during the night that Olympia was just the place for them. Eloise made them decide that.

"That girl," he confided to Big Bird as the wagon train set out the next morning, "certainly is a persuader."

Big Bird was not impressed. All women were persuaders, he said, and any man who was fool enough to argue with one was doomed to defeat before the argument began. He told Steve with quiet dignity, "My people have a saying: 'When a man has the last word with an echo, he may do so with a squaw.' This is wisdom."

Jim Ebling, whom Steve discovered

was a Portland man, decided to stay with the wagon train, though Lewis told him he could have his wages and go home if he chose.

"I'll stick with you," Ebling grunted, with a dark look at Steve. "You may need me."

They crossed the Columbia in the early morning. Treeless, rolling land lifted west of the river, gray with sagebrush and scattered dry tufts of bunch grass, and the feet of the oxen stirred up choking clouds of fine yellow dust that smarted in nostrils and eyes. The way skirted bare-topped hills, bleak under the clear bowl of the sky, and the wide land held a silent, brooding look, as if it resented the movement of the crawling wagons across its face after an eternity of stillness.

They left the Columbia on the second day and made camp that night on the Yakima, a good-sized river cutting down across the plain from the mountains to the west. Steve tried to still the tumult that came to him whenever he saw Ebling look at Eloise Lewis, but his hatred for the man grew, and a foreboding came to him that this thing could have no peaceful end.

Twilight was falling when he saw Eloise leave the camp and walk up the slope toward a bluff that loomed above the river. He told himself that he followed her only because he was fearful for her safety, but this was not wholly true, and when he caught up with her at last just as dusk purpled the bluff top where she stood, he found himself at a loss for anything to say.

She turned at his step, laughed, and climbed quickly atop a boulder the height of a table, and then sat there dangling her feet and smiling down at him.

"Why did you follow me?"

"It isn't safe for a girl like you to go so far from camp alone, ma'am."

"What kind of a girl would it be safe for?"

"Not any kind," he said in some confusion. "This is Yakima country. Some prowling buck would sure admire to have your hair on his belt."

"Pooh! If an Indian tried to scalp me, I'd spit in his eye, take his tomahawk away from him, and send him howling back to his squaw."

Likely that's just what she *would* do. Still, he said stubbornly, "Better get down and come back to camp."

He put out his hand to help her. She swung her feet lithely up, stood erect on the boulder, and said gaily, "I'll jump. Catch me!"

He made a bad catch. She slipped through his arms and fell in a heap, and he tripped and fell too. He got up quickly and bent over her, putting his hands under her arms and lifting her to a sitting position.

"Miss Lewis! Are you hurt, ma'am?"

She lay loose against his arms for a time, her body soft and warm to his hands. He felt her shaking and for a moment thought she was crying, then realized angrily that she was laughing.

"Get up!" he commanded.

She raised her head and looked at him. "My first name is Eloise. What's yours?"

"Steve. Get up."

"Pick me up."

"Why do you keep laughing?"

"You were so funny—thinking I was hurt. Women don't break that easy." She held out her hands. "Pick me up."

"If I do, I'll give you a good shaking."

He meant it. She looked at him solemnly, dropped her hands and started to get up. Suddenly she gave a little

moan and sank down again.

"Oh! I–I guess I twisted my ankle. It hurts."

He stood over her, staring down, trying to decide whether or not she was telling the truth. He said coldly, "Now I suppose you want me to carry you."

"I wouldn't let you touch me if my leg was broken!" she exclaimed. "Go away and–and–bite a rattlesnake!"

He stooped and picked her up. She struggled. "Stop squirming!" he snapped, and she suddenly became very still and stayed that way while he carried her down the hill. Just outside camp she sighed, "My, you're strong!" and jumped to the ground, to run on ahead of him, laughing merrily.

He stood for a moment in the shadows, staring after her, smiling uncertainly. A lively little filly, if ever he saw one. He reckoned the man that got her wouldn't ever complain of life being dull.

Because the season was late, he tried to hurry the wagons, but Jim Ebling said, "If the wagon road across the mountains is so good, what's the rush?"

Knowing the thieving ways of the Yakimas, he warned the emigrants to guard their stock well at night, but again the guide laughed and said, "Forget it! There's not an Indian in a hundred miles of us." So they set light guards and now and then good saddle horses disappeared, and, perversely, Steve was blamed for the losses, Ebling claiming he chose the campingsites poorly. This, too, he took in silence, for he read in Ebling's eyes that the man was goading him in hope of making him lose his temper–and his head.

They got their first glimpse of the mountains a week after they left the Columbia, a long blue ridge upthrust above the horizon with several distinct snow-capped peaks rising above. Eloise, walking along beside the wagon, claimed she couldn't see them, so he got off his horse and stood beside her and pointed them out.

"See them now?" he said, lifting his arm. "That's Mt. Adams directly west, and there, farther north, is Rainier. Named after an Englishman who never even saw it, they say. The Indians call it Ta-ho-ma–'Big Mountain'."

She put her head against his arm and sighted along it. "It doesn't look very big from here, does it?"

"Wait a few days and you'll see how big it is."

A horse came up behind them and Jim Ebling grunted, "I didn't know this was a sightseeing tour. Get up front where you belong."

Steve turned, the hatred in his throat nearly choking him. "I like it right where I am."

"Maybe Eloise don't."

"I didn't hear her ask your opinion."

"I'm giving it to you, just the same."

Eloise laughed and ran to catch up with her father's wagon.

Ebling's eyes burned harshly. "Leave her be, damn you. She's mine."

"Maybe she'll have something to say about that," Steve said, swung into the saddle, and headed for the front of the slow-moving column.

Half a dozen Yakima bucks came riding into camp that evening, tall, fiercely handsome men clad in beaded buckskins, holding their right arms aloft to show that they had no hostile intentions.

Ebling greeted them, talked to them for a moment in their own tongue, and

then as Steve and Daniel Lewis came up he turned and said, "They'll make no trouble. Just a hunting party."

"Ask them about the road," Lewis said.

"No road across mountains," one of the Yakimas grunted in English.

Ebling eyed Steve. "I reckon they ought to know. They just got back from the other side of the mountains."

"They're lying," Steve said.

"Why should they lie?" Lewis cut in impatiently.

"Because Ebling told them to." He looked at the guide and said evenly, "How much whisky did you promise to give them for lying?"

The angry flash of Ebling's eyes warned him of what was coming. As the knife flashed out, he leaped toward the man, caught the wrist, twisted it. He brought his knee up hard into the man's belly, jerked him around, and caught him flush on the jaw with a whiplash right. Ebling stumbled backward, fell, then rose slowly, reaching for the gun on his hip.

"I'll kill you for that!"

"That's enough!" Daniel Lewis said sharply. His hand closed on Steve's shoulder and the anger in his eyes stayed Ebling's hand. His probing gaze went from one man to the other.

"You've been at each other's throats ever since you met. What have you got against each other?"

"I've got no use for a liar," Ebling muttered.

"There's more to it than that. What is it?"

Ebling wiped the trickle of blood from his jaw and said, "Ask Eloise."

"So that's it!" Lewis said softly. "Then stay away from her. Both of you. Ebling, send these Indians away. Carey, come with me. I want to talk to you."

When they were alone, Lewis demanded, "What did you mean by that remark about Ebling promising to give them whisky?"

Steve looked down at the ground. "Nothing."

"Ebling has said from the beginning that there was no road. Now these Yakimas say it."

"There's a road."

"I'm beginning to wonder."

"I'll stake my life on it."

Lewis looked at him, his eyes cold. "That's just what you *will* be doing. I suppose you've heard what the emigrants did to Hank Marlow last year."

He had heard. Hank Marlow had been an honest but foolish guide who tried to pilot fifty wagons of Missourians through a cut-off he said he knew across the Blue Mountains down in Oregon. When he succeeded only in getting the wagon train lost, the angry emigrants stripped him, flogged him, and then staked him out naked for the wolves to find.

"I'm no Hank Marlow," he said.

"You'd better not be," Lewis said bleakly. "And stay away from my daughter, Carey."

They struck the foothills a week later. Timber appeared, scant and dwarfed at first, growing thicker and taller as the way lifted, and the tired oxen dragged the heavy wagons up the twisting, narrow trail with increasing difficulty.

"When do we hit the wagon road?" Lewis asked.

"Soon. This side of the pass, I'd say."

"What makes you so sure the settlers didn't get tired of building it and quit right after you left them?"

He had no reason. Only a blind faith.

"They're my people," he said. "They don't quit once they tackle a thing."

The nights grew sharp with cold and of mornings the frost lingered until the sun was well above. Each sunset and sunrise found Steve studying the sky with concern, praying that snow would not come. He asked Big Bird how long the snow would hold off and the Indian shook his head.

"Not long now. Maybe five sleeps."

Five days. That might be time enough—barely enough.

He obeyed Daniel Lewis and neither looked at nor spoke to Eloise, but inside him was a great, aching emptiness. He kept remembering that evening on the bluff—the sound of her laughter, the warmth of her eyes, the soft feel of her body in his arms.

Patience, he thought; *no misery lasts forever.*

He had gone for water to a stream near the camp one evening when he saw her coming down the bank toward him, a pail in her hand.

She said, "You've been going out of your way to avoid me, Steve."

The hunger in him was a deep burning. "Guess I just been busy."

"Pa told you to, didn't he?"

"Yes."

Her eyes flashed and she stamped her foot. "Are you a man or a rabbit? Do you always do just what people tell you to?"

He dropped his gaze, his jaws working. "He *is* your pa."

"I don't care if he's—if he's *God!* He's got no right to tell you you can't see me if you want to. If you were any kind of a man at all you'd tell him to go take a flying jump at the moon!"

In two swift strides he reached her, the hunger in him turning into anger. He seized her by the elbows and shook her.

"Do you think I like not seeing you?"

"You make a body wonder."

"Don't you know I love you?"

She stared up at him, her eyes suddenly wide. "You *what?*"

"Reckon you heard what I said," he muttered.

"Then if you love me, why are you afraid of Pa?"

"I ain't afraid of him. But I got a job to do."

"More important than me?"

The torment in him seemed about to tear him in two. "You're one thing. The job's another. I said I'd get the wagons across the mountains and I will. I told your pa I'd stay away from you—and I guess I'll have to do that too."

She said very quietly, "You're not very far away from me now."

He pulled her fiercely to him, kissed her, then he let her go. He picked up the pail she had dropped, filled it with water, and handed it back to her.

Without meeting her eyes, he said thickly, "You get back to camp."

"Is that all you've got to say to me?"

"Right now it is. Maybe later—"

"Maybe later I won't be around to listen!" she said with an angry toss of her head. "Jim Ebling says if we don't hit the wagon road in two more days he's going to leave the train and go back to Walla Walla. He wants me to go with him."

"Are you going?"

"Would you stop me?"

"No," he said, staring down at the ground. "Not if that's what you want to do."

The snow started falling shortly after midnight. Big Bird wakened him in the darkness and told him, and he lay

for a while with his eyes open.

"Well, I reckon we can't stop it," he said, and went back to sleep.

When daylight came, six inches of soft, wet snow covered the trail. In silence the Illinois men yoked the oxen, and their silence was a harsh, sullen thing. Their eyes followed him as he moved among them and he sensed their brooding mistrust.

Lewis said, "Where's Big Bird?"

"Gone ahead."

"Have you lost the way?"

"No," he answered shortly.

The next two days were an endless, bitter nightmare as the wagon train struggled up the mountainside. Snow fell continuously from a dull gray sky, wet and clinging, and now and then when the trail moved along a treeless cliff shoulder the main bulk of The Mountain loomed above, gigantic, somber, its scarred sides deeply blanketed with snow.

Worn-out oxen fell and did not rise. Children sickened and lay wracked with fever in the jolting wagons, while the women stumbled along behind in order to lighten the load that much. Lewis no longer asked about the road, but now and then Steve saw the Illinois man looking at him, a grim promise in his eyes.

Steve made a circuit of the camp just before bedtime. No man's voice spoke to him, though savage, bitter eyes lifted as he passed, and behind his back he heard the low growl of argument. He sensed that their patience was near the breaking-point.

He stood long in the shadows, smoking, staring up the mountainside into the snow-filled blackness. Tomorrow, with luck, they would reach the crest of the pass. Beyond lay steep, heavily timbered country too rugged and dense to permit passage of a wagon. If the road were not there—

He heard the murmur of voices near by. He heard Ebling say, "I've got the horses ready. We'll start in the morning before anyone is up."

There was a silence. Then Eloise said in a voice so low that it was barely audible, "All right."

He lay sleepless in his blankets long after the fires had died. He could stop it. A word to Daniel Lewis would do it. Somewhere out in the night the howl of a wolf rose and then died away. He listened to the faint rustling of the tree limbs above him for a long while, then at last he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

He was up with the first light of dawn. He left the camp and walked up the trail on foot, coming out of the forest after an hour or so to stand on an open cliff shoulder and stare up the mountainside. The wind was stronger there, whipping the flakes of snow stingingly against his face, and his eyes followed the trail upward, seeking some sign of the beginning of the wagon road. After a while, he turned and walked slowly down the trail.

He was a quarter of a mile from camp when he saw her. She came toward him through the dimness, half running, half stumbling through the drifts, and there was something in her face that made the blood beat slow and thick through his veins.

He stopped. She flung herself against him, her whole body trembling violently.

"*Steve! Steve!*"

"You didn't go with him."

"No, no, I couldn't!"

She lifted her face, and her eyes were wide with fright. "Don't go back to camp, Steve. Jim Ebling has convinced

everyone that you lied to them and the men are angry enough to kill you. They're not going any farther—"

He smiled. "Reckon I can make them change their minds."

"But, Steve—!"

He took off his coat and put it around her. "Don't you fret. They'll all sing a different tune when I tell them—"

The movement in the thicket was scarcely more than a slight stirring of branches in the wind—that and a faint, muffled click. But together, they were warning enough. Thrusting Eloise rudely to the ground, he whirled and lunged into the thicket.

Flame blasted toward him. The roar of a percussion-cap pistol deafened him. Then he was through the thicket, grappling with Jim Ebling, twisting the long-barreled pistol out of the man's hand before he could cock it for a second shot.

Ebling cursed and lashed out with his left hand. A smashing blow against Steve's mouth drove him back and the deep snow made him stumble and fall. Ebling's knife flashed out and the stocky guide leaped upon him, the knife hand driving down. Eloise screamed. But Steve's right knee flexed, a heavy boot swung. The breath drove out of Ebling in a sudden painful grunt as the kick caught him in the stomach and sent him crashing into a tree trunk six feet away.

Stumbling erect, Steve wiped the blood off his mouth with the back of his hand. He waited. But Ebling was done. He lay crumpled at the base of the tree in the snow, moaning that his ribs were broken. Coldly Steve looked down at him.

"You're lucky. I should have killed you."

The shot had been heard in camp and men came hurrying up the trail now. They formed an angry circle around Steve, and Eloise moved close to him, defiance in her face as the circle parted long enough to let her father through. He was carrying a coiled blacksnake whip and his face was like granite. His eyes flicked briefly down to Ebling, then returned to Steve.

"Fighting, were you? Fighting over personal grudges when all our lives are in danger." He slapped the coiled whip against his left palm. "I warned you long ago, Carey. I always keep my promises."

"So do I," Steve said quietly. "If you'll just be patient—"

"Patient, hell!" someone in the crowd muttered. "A few more days of this snow and cold and we'll all be dead. You said we'd hit the road long before now. I don't believe there *is* a road."

It was difficult to smile with his bruised and swelling lips but somehow Steve managed it. "The road is there, just like I said it would be. Only I guess they found it tougher going than I expected. When I walked up the trail just now, I saw where it begins. If we start right away, we'll hit it by noon."

They did. They hit the wagon road at noon and a while later topped the crest of the pass. As they rested there, a dozen men on horseback, led by Big Bird, came up the road from the west. Others followed close on their heels—scores of them—cheerful, hard-handed Olympia men who had left their homes a hundred miles away as soon as the Indian had brought word that Steve Carey was leading a wagon train over the pass. With fresh animals, with food, with warm clothes, with axes and ropes and shovels, they came up the

new road, prepared, if necessary, to bring the wagons down the snow-choked slopes by brute force.

"We stopped work on the road just a week ago and went home," they told Steve. "We'd given up hope of your bringing any wagons through this season."

"How's the snow farther on?" Steve asked.

"Belly-deep to a short horse. But, hell, there ain't enough snow in the world to keep us from gettin' these wagons through. All Olympia is turning out to help."

A great pride swelled in Steve as he watched the Olympia men work, men who laughed and joked and sang as they put strong shoulders to mired wheels, laid sharp axes to thick trees where the road needed widening, cleared snow and ice off the new bridges. These were his people. He had not failed them and they had not failed him. Next year the road would no longer be a new road; it would be an old road worn smooth by the passage of many wheels. This was only the beginning—of a road, of a city, of a state.

Later, Eloise led him away from the evening campfire into the shadows behind her father's wagon. Her eyes were shining as she looked up at him.

"You said that getting the wagons through was one thing," she whispered, "and I was something else. Don't you think it's about time you gave some attention to that something else?"

He said it was way past time.

Solution to "Prairie Puzzler" on page 40

O	W	N	■	J	A	V	A	■	■	D	A	D	■	I	C	E
F	R	I	J	O	L	E	S	■	C	I	M	A	R	R	O	N
F	A	C	E	S	■	T	H	R	U	M	■	T	E	A	M	S
■	N	E	W	E	R	■	E	A	T	■	S	A	N	T	A	■
O	G	R	E	■	I	N	S	P	E	C	T	■	T	E	N	T
U	L	■	L	O	P	E	■	P	R	O	O	F	S	■	C	O
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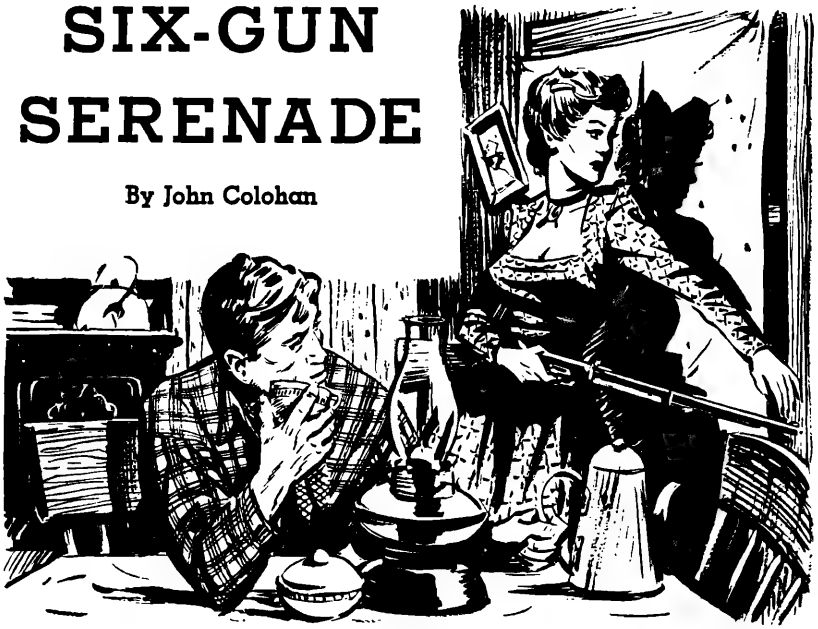
■	R	U	S	T	■	R	E	D	S	■	E	R	A	S	E	D
■	■	R	E	S	I	S	T	■	P	A	N	E	L	S	■	■
S	P	R	A	I	N	■	S	H	U	N	■	S	L	A	P	■
O	R	O	■	D	U	N	■	E	R	G	O	T	■	Y	A	W
L	A	■	T	E	R	R	O	R	■	E	A	S	T	■	L	O
D	I	C	E	■	E	A	R	M	A	R	K	■	E	B	O	N
■	R	O	P	E	D	■	A	I	R	■	S	C	R	A	M	■
F	I	R	E	D	■	A	T	T	A	R	■	O	R	R	I	S
R	E	N	E	G	A	D	E	■	B	A	N	D	A	N	N	A
A	S	S	■	E	W	E	■	■	S	H	O	E	■	S	O	D

SIX-GUN SERENADE

By John Colohan



Marooned in a ranch house with a smiling stranger who is supposed to be her enemy, pretty Judy Winton finds him a welcome ally when four hardcases fort up for a siege in the Big Four bunkhouse.

Chapter One

Marooned!

WITH the first faint beginnings of apprehension, Judith Winton watched the little liveryman unload bundles on the porch. She clamped her jaw tightly and tried to thrust from her mind this feeling that was so very much like fear—this feeling that had been with her ever since she had gained her first sight of this grim old log house looming up out of a waste of snow like some deserted fortress.

It was folly, she told herself insistently. An unfamiliar setting, a lonely land, a harping old man—these three in combination had managed to disturb her nerves. That was all. But uneasiness stayed on, tucked away in a remote corner of her mind.

She tried the front door and found it open. A cheery fire blazed in a big heater in the living-room. She helped the little man carry bundles until the last of the load she had brought from town stood in the center of the living-room floor. The liveryman took off heavy mittens and held his hands out to the glow of heat thrown out by the pot-bellied stove. The little man had a seamed and bony face, and he watched

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the girl with curious bright eyes.

"Yuh sure yuh'll be all right, ma'am?" he asked suddenly.

"Quite sure," said Judith. She said it sharply, and instantly was sorry, for sharpness was not her natural manner. "I mean—I knew it would be lonely. I expected that."

The little man nodded. "Plenty lonely," he agreed. "Place has been pretty much deserted since old Cal Moffatt got killed. An' she's fixin' up for snow, and snow might leave yuh marooned for weeks."

Marooned! Marooned here in the center of this lonely waste, miles from anywhere. Not a particularly inviting prospect.

Judith took off the heavy woolen cap, brushed flame-colored curls back from her forehead. She was a tall girl, slim as a boy in her mackinaw and riding-garb. She spread fingers to the heat.

Marooned! But she wouldn't be alone: There was a caretaker here somewhere, although he had not yet put in an appearance. An old man, thoroughly reliable, her lawyer had said—

For a moment then, she was back in Sam Ingersoll's stuffy little office in Aroya. She was remembering how the fat lawyer had bridged chubby fingers while he told her that she had inherited her Uncle Cal Moffatt's Big Four ranch. But, it appeared, there was a catch to it.

"You see, Miss Winton," fat Sam Ingersoll had explained, "your uncle had been figuring to quit the cow business. His health was shot, and he aimed to cash in everything. He had this deal on with Lige Benson for the land, but Benson aimed to stock with thoroughbred stuff, so the understanding was that Cal was to market his own stock. So he did, using most of the money to clear up a note against the place. Cal and Lige was just closing the deal for the ranch itself when they was killed. So, you see—"

The fat lawyer's voice had wheezed on and on in endless explanation.

A man named Lige Benson had been buying her uncle's Big Four ranch. The deal had been closed; the agreement had been drawn up and signed; and everything had been concluded to the satisfaction of the two men. They had started in for Aroya to close the deal. They had been stopped in Poncha Pass by masked men. . . .

"Cal had insisted that he had to have his money in cash," the fat man told Judith. "Your uncle never did believe much in banks. So there they were, the two of them, riding in to town with forty thousand dollars, and when these stick-up gents threw guns on them they showed fight, and both of them were killed. Which makes a very pretty kettle of fish. You see, Benson's heirs claim that Lige had paid the money over to your uncle—claim they got a bill of sale and papers to prove it. Whereas, we claim that the sale had not been consummated—that legally the money still belonged to Lige Benson, and that, therefore, it was Benson who was robbed."

The lawyer had rubbed fat hands together and explained the various fine legal points involved; and Judith had watched and listened and nodded her head. She knew that Ingersoll had been Cal Moffatt's lawyer for twenty years or longer, and she had the utmost faith in the fat man. And Ingersoll explained it was necessary that she take over immediate possession of the ranch.

"Possession is still nine points of the

law," he told the girl. "That's why you got to get out there and take possession right away. I sent Jim Barr out to look after things, but he's just a hired hand, of course. He's an old fellow, thoroughly reliable—"

Barr had not appeared since Judith's arrival at the ranch, but it was evident that he must be about somewhere. This cozy fire in the living-room bore witness to his presence; and there was fire also in the kitchen range and a kettle of something simmering on the back part of the stove.

The little liveryman stirred and pulled on his mittens. "I'd like to be through the Pass before the snow hits. So, if everything's all right—"

So Judith paid him for the trip from town and watched him whirl team and buckboard back along a road that was already lined with drifted snow. She had bought a saddle horse in Aróya, trailing him out behind the buckboard; and now she waded through snow to put the horse up in the barn. A sorrel horse in a box stall was placidly munching hay.

Judith climbed into the loft and forked loose hay down to her mount. All this she did mechanically; she had grown up on a ranch, and all of this was routine.

She went back to the house. That sorrel in the box stall must belong to Barr, and the man himself could not be very far away. She stomped snow from her boots and went inside, and from the living-room she caught a glimpse of a man's back in the kitchen. That would be Barr, she mused—

As she swung through the house she gained a hasty impression of wide shoulders in a flannel shirt, of a pair of abnormally long legs ending in scuffed riding-boots. The man was stirring the mixture in the kettle. He turned and looked at her.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said easily. His eyes flicked over her in a quick glance of approval that brought a flush to her cheeks. "Hope you'll excuse my manners—the lack of them, I mean. I must have been asleep when you drove up."

But there was some mistake. However reliable he might be, this was no old man. This was a big, bronzed man with gray eyes that were friendly enough, with lips that quirked oddly at the corners when he smiled.

"Are you—Jim Barr?" Judith asked.

"No, ma'am. I'm Pete Holding."

The girl had a swift premonition then. "But where is Barr?" she demanded. "And—what are you doing here?"

He rubbed a lean jaw thoughtfully. She noted that the little finger of his left hand was gone. "Taking the questions as they come out of the chute," he grinned, "if Barr was the old jasper who was holding the fort here, I sent him on his way. He's gone. And me—I'm sorta sticking around because I own this shebang."

Her lips tightened. "Isn't this the Big Four? Isn't this Cal Moffatt's ranch?"

"It's the Big Four, all right."

"I'm Cal Moffatt's niece," she said quietly. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, Uncle Cal left this ranch to me. I'm here to take possession."

He shook his head. His face was grave enough, but there was a hint of deep amusement in his eyes. "But you can't do that, ma'am. I'm mighty sorry, but I've already got possession."

She was a redhead, with a redhead's temper. "You've got no right here! You've got to get out!"

"I've got possession," Pete Holding pointed out. "You can't get away from that."

"You have no right here."

"I don't know what you're using for facts," the big cowboy said soberly. "All I know is that Lige Benson bought this place from your uncle just before both of them were killed. Lige was *my* uncle. The bill of sale was made out and signed."

Judith decided she didn't like that trick he had of keeping his face sober and yet seeming to laugh at her.

"The transfer was never recorded," she said. "The money was never paid over."

"There was a bill of sale, ma'am."

Holding was grinning openly now, and that grin played havoc with her temper.

"That's a matter for the courts," she said. "Meanwhile, I'm here to take possession until it's settled. My lawyer—"

His slow grin mocked her. "But I got a lawyer, too. Besides that, I've got possession."

She stood still, a tall and slender girl with flashing eyes, staring angrily at him. Here was something that fat Sam Ingersoll hadn't mentioned—a possibility which she had failed to consider herself. What should she do now? Should she turn the ranch over to this young man with the aggravating grin and ride back to town and acknowledge her defeat? Or should she fight?

She made her mind up in an instant. It was a redhead's choice. "*We've* got possession," she said coolly.

He beamed. "Say, that's fine! I've been eating out of a frying pan for two days. Can you cook biscuits?"

"You have no right here," Judith said icily. "This was my uncle's ranch, and now it's mine—at least, until the courts say otherwise. I can't throw you off, of course. But I can pretend that you don't exist until I can make arrangements to have you thrown off."

She turned her back on him scornfully and went to the living-room. Now, for the first time, she looked around the house. Once, years ago, she had spent two happy summers here, and now she saw that everything was just as she remembered it. Here was the same long living-room, the same faded carpet on the floor, the same ornately framed crayon enlargement of Cal Moffatt's long-dead wife looking down from the wall, the same wooden pegs lined with guns above the big stone fireplace.

She was stirred by old memories as she moved slowly through the house. She stopped before the room which had been her uncle's and opened the door, but she saw rumpled bedclothes and a man's garments scattered about, and so she backed out hastily. Pete Holding, it seemed, had appropriated her dead uncle's room for his own use, and the thought stirred her anger anew. But there was nothing she could do about it now, absolutely nothing.

In another wing of the rambling old house she found a room which she selected for her own. She made up a bed and rearranged things to her liking.

Her brain kept fumbling with the facts of this bizarre situation. Herself, and a man she had never seen before, together in this lonely old ranch house. She recalled the little liveryman's warning that snow might leave her marooned here for weeks. Marooned with that young man with the mocking, impudent grin—!

When she went back to the living-room Pete Holding was sprawled in an easy chair, long legs stretched out be-

fore him, and a pipe between his teeth.

From her traveling-bag Judith brought a bulldog thirty-eight revolver. Well aware that Holding was watching her, she loaded the gun with ostentatious care. She would serve warning on him now that she was prepared for anything. She flicked a sidewise glance his way and saw that he was grinning in sheer delight. Angrily she flung the gun back into her bag.

He palmed the pipe in his hand. "I can stake you to a gun belt, ma'am," he said cheerfully.

Furious at him, she managed to bite back the hot retort already forming on her lips. "Thank you," she said coldly. "I don't expect to need one."

He had an easy knack of making her angry. She felt just a little bit ridiculous. This situation was utterly impossible—herself and this lean cowpuncher fighting for possession of a lonely ranch house miles from anywhere. But Pete Holding had no rights here. To be sure, it was a matter for the courts to decide, but meanwhile she was grimly determined to hold the fort. Possession was nine points of the law, Sam Ingersoll had said. But how did the law read if both parties to the dispute were in possession?

Chapter Two

Uninvited Guests

THE liveryman, it developed, was a weather prophet. It snowed that afternoon. Great flakes almost as large as saucers came down, dropping straight and slow to lay a blanket of white across the land.

For a while that afternoon Pete Holding was busy at the woodpile, and then he took up his position again in the easy chair in the living-room to smoke his pipe in contemplative silence. Judith moved restlessly about.

"We might as well be friendly," he said once. "I'll make a deal with you. You take care of the cooking chore and I'll handle the rest of it. I'll even do the dishes."

Her blue eyes impaled him. "No," she said curtly, and Pete Holding shrugged his shoulders and grinned his aggravating grin.

Dusk closed down over the ranch. The cowboy kept his position in the living-room, moving only to add piñon chunks to the fire in the pot-bellied stove. Judith lit a lamp in the kitchen and began preparations for the evening meal. Holding had piled wood behind the range. The girl built the fire up and cooked a meal.

She was cleaning away the oilcloth-covered table when from the yard outside she heard a bellowing voice:

"Hello, the house!"

She was so glad to hear another voice in this solitude that she was across the room and standing in the open kitchen door almost without conscious thought.

Four men in saddle were outside, with snow-covered hats and sheepskin coats, their horses breathing steam. One of the riders swung down from his horse and came plowing through the snow. He pulled up before the porch, a big man buried to the ears in his heavy coat.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said, and stood there staring up at her. In the crowding dusk his face was just a blurred shadow beneath his hat. "We're heading in toward Aroya. Saw your light and figgered we might be able to get

some coffee and a meal. We been in saddle all day."

"Of course," Judith said. There wasn't anything else that she could say—to turn hungry men away would be unthinkable. "You can put your horses in the barn. You'll find feed there, and I'll be glad to cook you up a meal."

The man in the sheepskin coat nodded and turned back toward his companions. As Judith closed the kitchen door Pete Holding came into the room. She saw that his grin was gone, that his face was grave. And she saw something else, with some surprise: Pete Holding had strapped a gun belt around his waist. He had not worn a gun before, but now the black butt of a Colt jutted out of a leather holster.

He spoke curtly: "What did they want?"

"Supper," she said, just as curtly.

He nodded, dropped into a chair, braced his big shoulders back comfortably against the wall, and produced his pipe. He was sitting there when the riders came piling into the kitchen, and, looking them over as they shuffled into range of the lamp, Judith admitted reluctantly to herself that she was rather glad that Holding was on hand. In all charity, these visitors were not a particularly prepossessing lot.

The big man who seemed to be spokesman doffed his Stetson and slapped it against his leg. His mouth was a thin slash across a hard, beard-stubbled face. He looked at the cowboy lounging back negligently against the wall.

"This is winter, sure enough," he stated. "A gent will need webs if this keeps on. My handle's Frawley—Joe Frawley."

The younger man nodded. "Plenty of snow, all right. It'll be neck-deep to a big Swede by morning. I'm Pete Holding."

Frawley's cold, pale eyes roved the kitchen restlessly. "You folks are new here, ain't you?"

"Yeah," said Holding. "We just moved in—Red and me."

Red! Judith shot a glance of pure venom at him, biting her lips in anger.

Talk flowed around her as she moved about the kitchen—the clipped words of men making conversation in which they were not greatly interested. Joe Frawley did most of the talking for the visitors and seemed to be the leader of the crowd. Judith moved the big table out from the wall.

The man Frawley was watching her. "Hate to put you to so much bother, Mrs. Holding," he said.

"It's nothing," Judith murmured.

Mrs. Holding! She saw the flicker of amusement across Pete Holding's face. Frawley thought, of course, that they were man and wife, and there wasn't any way that she could tell him otherwise. Any explanation she might offer would sound worse than the actual fact. These men didn't matter, anyhow. They would leave in an hour.

Judith knew that she would be glad when this meal was done, when these men had ridden on. Watching them, she couldn't help wondering what errand had sent them riding across this lonely, snow-covered bench. They didn't have the appearance of cowhands.

Frawley sat directly under the lamp, and she studied the hard lines of his face—the pale, cold eyes, the curved beak that was his nose, the tight slash that was his mouth. A crescent scar marred his right cheek; under the stubble of beard it showed in outline

under the lamplight like the mark of an old, haired-over brand.

The meal ended at last. The visitors pushed back from the table. Joe Frawley rolled a cigarette between blunt fingers, glanced at Holding.

"That was just right. I don't seem to remember when grub tasted quite that good. We'd be glad to pay—"

But Holding waved a hand. "It's on the house."

There was something odd, constrained, in the manner of that big, bearded man. "Another thing," he said. "It's snowing pretty heavy, and Poncha Pass is liable to drift full tonight. I'd rather tackle it by daylight if you could put us up tonight."

Pete Holding had found a couple of walnuts somewhere. He was toying with them idly, tossing them up and catching them, rolling them under his hand on the little serving-table at his elbow.

"Plenty of room," Holding said.

Judith stood by silently, not liking this latest development, but seeing no way to avoid it. Holding's face was bland, expressionless.

"Plenty o' room in the bunkhouse. Bedding and everything. Stove and firewood if you want a fire. Just make yourselves at home."

"In the bunkhouse?" said Frawley. His pale eyes moved around the table in a quick glance toward these others of his crowd. It was as though he had given a signal, flashed some cryptic message. "We was thinking—"

Suddenly, Judith knew that this was a showdown. She knew that something more than the need of a meal had drawn these men this way, and she had the feeling that they were going to show their hand now.

"We was thinking—" Joe Frawley began, and then, quite suddenly, his voice faded out.

For a moment that kitchen was very quiet as the four men stared at Pete Holding. Pete had brought a black gun up from nowhere. In his right hand now he held the gun, deftly balanced; in his left hand he held a walnut. Even as the visitors stared at him Holding tapped the shell of the walnut lightly with the barrel of the gun.

Frawley spoke in an odd, strained voice. "That's a hell of a way to treat a gun."

Pete Holding's grin flashed on and off. He held the gun up for an instant. "It's a right good gun," he said blandly. "I've done everything but shoe a bronc with it."

He tapped the walnut lightly, crumpled the shell. Only then did Judith understand the meaning of the byplay which for an instant had puzzled her. Pete Holding had that gun ready in his hand; he was using it, apparently, to crack a walnut; but Judith saw now that with a minimum of effort Pete Holding had secured a dead drop on this crowd.

"Yeah," Pete Holding was saying. "You gents are certainly welcome to make camp in the bunkhouse. Be glad to have you."

And Frawley nodded. "I take that mighty kind," he said. There wasn't any change in his voice, but there was new and wholesome respect in his eyes. "I reckon we'll do it that way."

When, a few minutes later, the four men filed out of the kitchen, Pete Holding followed after them to the door. He was suave, very polite, but Judith noted that the black gun still dangled idly in his hand. He seemed to have forgotten it.

Holding stood in the doorway and

watched the visitors depart. He glanced at Judith then. "Pull the blinds down, Red," he said.

"Don't call me Red!" she snapped.

But she pulled all the blinds down on the windows in the kitchen. She didn't like Pete Holding and she felt that he had no right on this ranch, but in common with Joe Frawley she had developed a sudden and wholesome respect for that long-legged young rider.

Holding waited until the blinds were drawn before he crossed the room to drop into a chair. He slid his gun into holster.

"I gotta call you something," he said mildly. "You never did get around to introducing yourself."

"My name," she stated crisply, "is Winton—Judith Winton."

"I'll call you Judy. I can't remember long names."

She let it go. There was no point in arguing with him now. A new and disturbing element had intruded in the situation; and, although she would have sacrificed an arm rather than admit it, in her heart Judith knew she was very glad that Pete Holding was here.

"These men," she said. "You don't know them, of course."

He shrugged carelessly. "Never seen any of them before. Seemed like a right nice bunch of boys."

"Charming," she agreed. His careless pose fooled her not at all. "Especially the hook-nosed gentleman who calls himself Frawley. Did you notice that scar across his cheek?"

"Yeah, I saw that. Set me wondering some, that scar did. You see, Judy, they figgered the bunch of bandits that pulled that job in Poncha Pass was ramrodded by a gent name of 'Hook' Malloy. They call him 'Hook' because he's got a scar shaped like a hook across one cheek. Or so they claim."

She stared. "You mean – the men who got your uncle's money?"

"It was *your* uncle's money," he explained patiently. "You see, my uncle had bought this place and paid your uncle, and then these holdup gents moved in on them—"

"Our uncles' money," she amended impatiently. "But, surely, these couldn't be the same men. What would they want here?"

"Mebbe," he suggested thoughtfully, "they came back here to get the house."

He tapped his pipe against a boot heel, brought out a can of tobacco. She watched him impatiently. "What do you plan to do?" she asked.

"I was just figuring to load my pipe."

"Darn your old pipe!" she exploded. She stamped her foot in anger. "I mean about those men."

"Nothing much to do, the way I see it. Mebbe they'll drift on in the morning. Mebbe not. We'll have to wait and see. If they got anything in mind we'll probably find out soon enough."

But Judith knew that the arrival of this unsavory crowd had troubled Pete Holding just as it troubled her. She noticed that he was careful to draw the blinds before he lit the lamp in the living-room, and she knew that as soon as darkness closed in he made a hasty inspection of the house.

She washed the dishes, set the kitchen to rights again. She went to her room and lit a lamp and threw herself across the bed. She tried to read, but the printed words kept blurring before her eyes. She kept thinking of an ugly, hook-shaped scar that had stood out

so clearly under the light of the kitchen lamp. She kept seeing that hard-faced crew lined up around the long kitchen table, wolfing their food, watching her—

Was that man who called himself Joe Frawley really a bandit named "Hook" Malloy? What possible reason could there be for that crowd riding this way in mid-winter? Questions were piling up in her mind, questions she couldn't answer. She pictured that bunkhouse crew creeping through darkness toward the house.

Sleep, it seemed, was utterly out of the question. She glanced at her watch and saw that it was after midnight. Getting up from the bed, she opened her door cautiously to peer down the darkened hallway. There was no light in the living-room now. She had heard no sound from Pete Holding for hours.

She slipped into the hallway and moved toward the living-room. The room itself was dark but the door of the big stove was open, and a flaming piñon knot threw a flickering light across the floor. She saw Holding then, a dim shadow sprawled back in a chair against the wall, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe.

He must have heard her then, although she had meant to make no sound, for he lifted his head suddenly and looked straight at her. She lingered for an instant in the hallway.

"Good night," she said.

His voice was gentle. "Good-night—Mrs. Holding."

She turned back to her room. Perhaps she should have been angry again. She wasn't. There was something solid and reassuring in the sight of that lean young cowboy sprawled back against the wall.

Judith undressed swiftly and crawled beneath the covers and went to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Trickery!

SUNLIGHT was streaming through the window when she awoke next morning, and when she dressed and went out she found Holding already in the kitchen. He gave her a cheerful grin

"Morning, Judy."

"Good morning," she said. It wasn't easy to stay mad at him very long. She saw that he was washing up dishes and knew that he must have breakfasted already. "I guess I overslept. Have you seen anything of—our friends?"

"They haven't showed yet," he said. She wondered if he had slept at all. He was freshly shaved and betrayed no sign of weariness. "Mebbe they're waiting for us to sound the breakfast gong."

He hesitated, studying her thoughtfully. "I tell you Judy—we'll play that gang somewhat careful. I'm going to remind them it ain't considered etiquette to wear a gun when you're riding the chuck line. And you better keep outa sight." He frowned.

Judith was cooking breakfast for herself when the knock sounded on the door. Holding swung across the floor on long legs. The man who called himself Frawley was standing on the porch.

"Morning," Holding said. "I was sorta wondering what happened to you gents."

Frawley shuffled his feet in the

snow. "One of our fellers is sick," he said. "I don't know what's wrong with him, but he seems pretty bad. We got to get him to a sawbones."

Judith crossed the floor swiftly to stand at Holding's elbow. She didn't trust that scar-faced, hook-nosed man outside, and she had a sudden premonition that this was some sort of a trick—some stratagem designed to catch Pete Holding off his guard.

"We're going to try to ride him into town," Frawley said.

"Can he ride?"

"There's the catch," Frawley said. "He's all doubled up—seems like something's gone wrong with his innards. I don't reckon he could set a horse to town. I seen a buckboard out in the shed and I wondered if we could borrow it. We'd leave it in town for you."

"There's no horses," Holding said.

"I see that. We figgered to use our own broncs. They're saddlers, but a coupla them are gentle enough to work double harness. We might have to work 'em over some."

It was a trick. Judith was quite sure it was a trick, although she couldn't see the flaw. She gripped Holding by the arm. The cowboy nodded.

"That's too bad, Frawley. Help yourself to anything you want."

"I'm obliged," said Frawley, and he turned around and trudged through snow back to the bunkhouse.

Judith spoke in a hasty whisper at Holding's ear. "It's a trick! Don't you go out there to the bunkhouse. I know that it's a trick!"

"Mebbe the jasper's really sick—"

She spoke vehemently. "I tell you it's a trick to catch you off guard. You stay here in the house."

He grinned. "Ain't you the redheaded little lady who was trying to get rid of me yesterday?"

"That was yesterday," she said.

A lot of things had happened since yesterday, it seemed. She stood at the window, her eyes fixed on the bunkhouse. She saw three men emerge to wade through snow toward the barn, hidden from her sight by the wagon shed and the blacksmith shop. Time passed; then a team and buckboard swung around the shed to pull up before the bunkhouse door. The horses seemed skittish in double harness, but the man Frawley sat in the buckboard seat and held them in line with an iron hand.

There was no evidence of trickery. The men carried a mattress from the bunkhouse and placed it in the bottom of the buckboard. She glanced at Holding, placidly smoking.

"They're getting ready for the trip," she said. "Oh, it seems heartless not to offer to help them—if the man's really sick—"

"Plenty of men out there," Holding said.

The men went back to the bunkhouse, to come out half carrying, half supporting a third man who dangled limply between them. They lifted the limp man into the buckboard, piled bedding over him. Judith saw one of them pass him a lighted cigarette.

Then, with the man who called himself Frawley in the driver's seat, with two men riding at the head of the skittish broncs, the buckboard swung down the road toward town. Judith watched it disappear from sight momentarily behind the bunkhouse, where the road curved; watched it reappear on the long stretch of snow-lined road leading away from the ranch. Frawley was sending the horses along at a spanking gait.

She turned to Holding. "They're gone."

"We still got possession," he grinned at her.

The storm was over, so Judith embarked on a tour of exploration.

Pete Holding was chopping wood in the woodshed behind the house.

As a girl she had played all about this ranch; the corrals, the sheds, the buildings, all held memories. She came to the bunkhouse where Frawley's crowd had spent the night. Pushing the door open, she stepped inside.

She took three steps. Suddenly, the door behind her closed with a bang. She whirled at the sound, to face a leveled gun. Behind the gun, a leering grin traced across his face, stood one of Frawley's crew.

"Get them hands high, girlie!" he rasped. "Don't make one little cheep or you'll never cheep again!"

She stared at him incredulously. He was short, squat, built like a gorilla. She could see the growth of reddish hair on the back of the hand that held the gun. He was one of those men who had eaten at her table last night.

"Where did you come from?" she gasped.

She had watched two of Frawley's crowd carry this very man from the bunkhouse—had watched them load him in a buckboard. And she had watched them drive off—had watched them until the buckboard had disappeared beyond the horizon.

He grinned. His teeth were ugly yellow fangs. "That was kinda neat, girlie. When the buckboard went around the bunkhouse I tumbled out and sneaked back in here through an open window."

She saw it now. There had been an interval between the time the buckboard had swung around the bunkhouse and the time it had reappeared. This man had used that brief moment of time to leap out, to sneak back to the bunkhouse and lie in wait like some ugly crouching spider. She had feared a trick—

"What do you want?" she said.

The man behind the gun leered at her. "I'll tell you something, sister. It wasn't you I wanted—the play was for your old man. But I reckon you'll have to do."

He was moving down on her, shuffling forward, showing his yellow teeth in that twisted leer. "I'll kill you if you make a sound. Turn around."

She turned. There wasn't any choice. He grabbed her roughly, twisted her arms behind her. She felt a cord bite into her wrists, felt the knot draw tight, and tighter. He poked her with the gun muzzle.

"Mebbe you'll do just as good," he said harshly. "Listen to what I tell you. Get it straight. I want you to walk over to that door and call your old man out here. Do it easy-like—tell him you got something you want to show him. He's a pretty cagey gent—"

That cord was biting deep into her flesh and her hands were turning numb. She looked into a pair of beady, red-rimmed eyes in a brutal, beard-stubbled face. She saw the gun held high. This man thought Pete Holding was her husband—and he wanted her to call Pete to the bunkhouse, to lure him into a trap—

"What do you want with him?" she whispered.

"Never mind that, baby." He jabbed her again with the gun. "I want him, see! I want him out here in this bunkhouse—that's all you need to know.

That's your job, getting him out here. And—don't make no mistakes!"

He grabbed her arm, whirled her around, and shoved her violently toward the door. "Reach out and open that door. Call your old man. Don't try to warn him—don't try anything! Sure as hell I'll kill you if you do!"

She could feel the solid thrust of the gun prodding her against her back as the squat man shoved her toward the door. He jerked the cord from her wrists.

"Open that door!" he snarled. "Call him—and be damn sure it sounds all right. Tell him you got something out here you want him to see. Get him out here. Savvy?"

"I understand," Judith said, low-voiced.

She grasped the knob, pulled the door wide. Sunlight glared in the dazzling whiteness of the snow-filled yard. Pete Holding was still chopping wood in the shed behind the kitchen.

She called:

"Pete! Oh, Pete!"

The gun bored into her back.

"Louder!"

She called again. Pete Holding came around a corner of the house, to stand there, ax in hand.

"Did you call me, Judy?"

"Yes." Her voice lifted despairingly. "There's a man out here—with a gun—"

She heard the muffled curse behind her. She tried to break, to run before the certainty of that bullet she could almost feel tearing into her back. But a hand gripped her shoulder violently and jerked her around, and she had a single glimpse of the bearded face mottled with fury, and then the black gun crashed against her head with stunning force.

Chapter Four

Blunder

HER head was throbbing intolerably. Someone was bathing her face with a cold wet rag. She opened her eyes and saw that it was Pete Holding. He was looking down at her steadily. He spoke roughly.

"How do you feel now, Judy?"

"I'm all right, Pete," she said, and tried to smile at him through the pain. She wondered what had happened.

Lifting a shaky hand, she found on her head a knot that felt like a hen's egg. She was in the bunkhouse, lying in a bunk now with a pillow under her head. She looked around slowly and saw that the bunkhouse had the appearance of a room visited by a cyclone. A window was broken, and chairs were toppled around, and the stove had been turned over. Soot trailed a black streak across the floor. There was a smear of soot across Pete Holding's forehead and a bruise on his right cheek.

Then Judith saw the other man. He was seated quietly in a chair in the center of the room. One of his eyes was closed completely; there was a livid bruise beneath the other; and his lips looked like chunks of mangled liver. He sat there quietly, his hands behind his back. Then Judith understood that he was tied there in the chair.

She stared up at Pete Holding. "What happened, Pete? How did you—get here?"

The big cowboy blew on his knuckles, grinned at her reassuringly. "I'll tell you, Judy—I surrounded him."

She shuddered at a memory. "He

wanted me to call you, Pete. He wanted me to help to trap you."

"Forget it," Holding said. "You're a great little girl, and everything turned out fine. If you want, we'll put that jasper in a cage and you can keep him for a pet. He's plumb docile now."

"I hope I never see him again."

"If you're all right, I'll talk it over with him," Holding said. He shoved himself up from the bunk's edge, moved across the room on long legs to stand over the bound man in the chair. "Just what did you have in mind, fellow?" Holding demanded. "What was your idea, anyhow?"

The bound man glared up at him out of his one good eye. "What was which idea?"

"What was your idea in trying to get Judy to call me out here—of smacking her with a gun when she didn't? Just what was you figgering on, anyhow?"

Words trickled through the bruised lips reluctantly. "It was Hook's idea. Hook figgered—"

"Hook!" snapped the big cowpuncher. "Then the jasper who called himself Frawley *was* Hook Malloy?"

But the squat man closed up like a clam. Quite plainly he had said more than he meant to say.

"He's Hook Malloy?" Holding repeated.

Still the bruised lips remained tightly closed.

"Please," Pete Holding said; and he reached out and slapped the bound man with his open hand—a solid slap that almost knocked the squat man out of his chair.

"I don't like these one-handed conversations," Pete Holding said. "Was that gent Hook Malloy?"

The one eye glared. "He's Hook, all right."

"What did he want here?"

The squat man thought it over. "Wanted a hide-out," he rasped sullenly. "Hook figgered this dump oughta make a bang-up hide-out for all winter. He knew Cal Moffatt was dead, and he figgered that once the Pass filled up with snow we'd be good here until spring. We all was sick of running."

"A hide-out, eh?" Holding reached into a pocket and found a knife and sprung the blade open. He walked behind the bound man and cut the rope that held him in the chair.

"Get out," he said. "Get out—and get out fast. Give Hook our love and tell him this place is already homesteaded for the winter."

The squat man stood up. Judith noted that his gun was gone, his holster empty. Holding followed him to the door.

"Get going," the rider snapped. "Don't even look back—if you do you're liable to meet a thirty-thirty slug face to face."

Shakily, Judith lifted herself to her feet to cross the floor and stand at Holding's back. The squat man was plowing through the snow, heading out on the road to town.

"Might be I should have kept him," Holding said. "But that would mean we'd have the rest of Malloy's crowd to deal with. Mebbe when Hook finds out what happened he'll keep his outfit clear of here."

Therein Pete Holding made a monumental blunder. It began to snow again that afternoon, with big flakes drifting down to form a curtain across the land—a thick, smothering curtain of white that blotted out the landscape, hid the mountains from sight, left man and girl in the ranch house marooned in the center of a desolate

waste.

Pete Holding took a nap that afternoon. Confessing to Judith that he had not slept a wink the night before, and warning her to keep watch on the chance that Malloy's crowd might return, he left her holding the fort while he slept for an hour.

"No telling about that gang," he said. "There's something funny—something I can't figure. I don't know what Malloy's game was, but he sure played it high, wide and handsome. Mebbe they're gone for good—and mebbe not."

She stared at him. "You think—they might come back?"

"Hard to say. I can't figure whatever brought them here to start with. That hide-out yarn sounds phony to me, Judy."

The matter of the disagreement between the girl and himself stood in abeyance for the moment. Judith didn't know what to do. She had started out grimly enough to show Pete Holding that she could hold possession of the ranch, but now she didn't know what course to follow. She had thought of riding to town for a consultation with Sam Ingersoll, the fat lawyer; but that would mean the abandonment of the stand she had taken with Holding. There was, besides, the possibility that Poncha Pass was drifted full of snow so that she would be unable to get through.

Another, more potent, consideration held her to the ranch. There was no certainty that Hook Malloy and his crowd had left the bench. They might still be lurking in the neighborhood, and she knew she didn't want to run a chance of meeting those men alone.

The afternoon slid by without event. Judith busied herself with small chores, staying close to the house, keeping watch as much as was possible in the face of that curtain of falling snow which made the big house a small, separate world. She made preparations for supper. She would cook a supper for two, she mused, and take especial care with the biscuits. Pete had said something about biscuits—

As she bustled around the kitchen, she unconsciously hummed to herself, but laughed when she became aware of it.

She was standing by the kitchen window building plans when a gust of wind knifed through the curtain of snow for an instant, to give her a quick glimpse of a segment of plain beyond the bunkhouse. She stood rooted, frozen in her tracks. That white curtain had brushed aside just long enough to let her see four men riding cross-country toward the ranch. Hook Malloy and his men were coming back!

She raced through the house to pound on the door of Holding's room. "Pete! Pete! Get up!"

"Coming, Judy. What's wrong?"

"There's men—riding this way! Malloy's crowd—"

He followed her to the kitchen. Snow had blotted out the plain again. His hand brushed his Colt. "I'll go out and see."

She grabbed him fiercely. "No. Wait, Pete. That was Malloy's gang. Let's wait and see what they do."

They waited. Time crawled by. It grew darker in the kitchen, but outside the storm was lifting. The bunkhouse emerged, a blurred outline a hundred yards from the house. Judith grabbed Pete Holding's arm.

"Look, Pete!"

He nodded. "I see it, Judy."

Smoke was rising in a black plume from the bunkhouse chimney!

"But—Pete—what do they want? Whatever can it be those men are planning?"

He grinned cheerfully. "Looks like they figgered to make camp here whether we wanted them or not."

And then suddenly he turned on her, and in the closing dark she saw that his face was sober and somewhat grim. "My gosh!" Pete Holding muttered.

"What is it, Pete?"

He shook his head. "What a bonehead I've been! What a fool!"

"But what is it, Pete?"

He crouched by the kitchen window. "Listen, Judy. Get this straight. Lige Benson was buying this ranch from your uncle—from old Cal Moffatt. The price was forty thousand dollars. But Cal Moffatt didn't like banks, so the money had to be paid over in hard cash. That was the way the deal was made, and Lige Benson brought the money here. They made their deal, and then the pair of them started in for town to finish the business. They was stopped in Poncha Pass—both of them killed—"

His voice drifted off. He stared at her in the gloom. "Don't you see it, Judy? Don't you savvy now why Hook Malloy and his crowd came back?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what you mean. I'm stupid, I guess. You mean you think Malloy's crowd robbed them—killed them—"

"They killed them, all right," Pete Holding said. "But they didn't rob them. Don't you see, Judy—they didn't rob them because neither Lige nor Cal Moffatt had that money. They'd left that money behind, here at the ranch where they made their deal. Cal Moffatt didn't believe in banks, and so there wasn't any reason for him to cart that cash into town. He'd left it behind, hidden somewhere—and when Malloy's crowd stuck them up they had only their trouble for their pains."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "But everybody was so sure they'd got the money—"

"Sure. Everybody figgered the stick-up gents had got the money. Hook and his crowd were on the run. But all they had to do was lay low and wait for a chance to come back here and look around for the money. That's what they're here for now. I guess they figgered this snowstorm was made to order for them."

"But, Pete—" the thought was tremendously exciting — "you think the money's still here in the house?"

"That's what I figure now, Judy. That's the way Hook figures it, too. That's why he came back."

The snow had almost stopped. They could see the bunkhouse clearly now, seeming to bulk larger in the dusk, with gray smoke pouring from the chimney. There was no sign of a light within.

The cowboy crossed to the lamp. "We might as well find out," he muttered. He looked at Judith. "Keep back against the wall."

He struck a match to the wick, set the lighted lamp on the window sill.

Hardly had his hand dropped away when, from the bunkhouse, a rifle roared, and the glass lamp shattered into a thousand pieces and the kitchen was dark again.

"They mean business," Pete Holding mused.

"It seems that way, Pete."

And man and girl crouched at the window and stared out through the closing curtain of the night. Soon it would be dark. Out in the bunkhouse were four men—four killers, if Pete

Holding had called the turn correctly. In the house a man and a girl, alone—

And, possibly, forty thousand dollars —in cash.

Chapter Five

Trapped!

SO IT began. There were to be three days of it —seventy-two incredible, nightmare hours —but neither Judith nor Pete Holding knew that then. They couldn't see that far ahead into the future.

Holding lined up a rifle and a shotgun at his side and took up his position at the kitchen window. Judith, no stranger to guns herself, crouched beside him with a rifle ready.

An hour dragged by. Inside the kitchen it was dark, broken only by the glint of flames from the kitchen range; but outside there still remained enough light to make a direct attack by that bunkhouse crowd a precarious undertaking. There was no sign of life from the men out there—nothing but that plume of smoke lifting from the bunkhouse chimney.

"They're awfully quiet," Judith said.

The man's voice was toneless. "Waiting for dark, I reckon."

But a big moon balked the outlaws that first night. Before it became completely dark the lunar orb, huge and full, lifted above the ragged mountain wall and flooded the whole white plain with a mellow, radiant light. Bunkhouse and sheds and corrals stood out in bold relief. Whatever advantage there might be lay with the defenders of the ranch. The big log house stood apart, a hundred yards beyond the bunkhouse, and in the snow-blanketed space between there was no concealment which offered the outlaws a chance to creep closer to the house.

The long night wore on. Twice there was movement from the bunkhouse. The first time dark shadows stirred in the shelter of the wagon shed, as though Malloy's crowd were preparing for a direct attack; but Pete Holding sprayed the shed with rifle bullets and nothing came of it but an answering fusillade from the bunkhouse which shattered windows along one side of the main cabin.

Later, two men dashed across open space beyond the corrals for the shelter of the creek which circled around the house. Pete Holding smashed bullets at them, although the distance was too great for anything like accurate shooting in the deceptive moonlight. But that attempt to surround the house was abandoned, because after an hour they saw the same two men run back for the protection of the corral.

An icy wind funneled down from the mountains, rippled snow in the yard outside, cut through the broken windows as sharp-edged as a knife. The night was bitterly cold.

Judith kept both the range and the big stove in the living-room heaped full of wood. At Holding's direction she sat on guard in the kitchen while he tacked blankets over the shattered windows.

It was long past midnight when the big puncher glanced at her. "Why don't you grab yourself some sleep, Judy?" he asked. "They won't try anything much tonight."

But Judith shook her head, knowing that Pete Holding had no sleep the night before. "I'm not a bit sleepy,

Pete. But why are you so sure they won't try anything tonight?"

His voice was grim. "Because they know we'll get two or three of them if they try to charge us in this moonlight. And it's too cold outside now for them to try anything else. I looked at the thermometer on the porch and she read fourteen below. That's too cold for Indian stuff. Those gents ain't likely to stir around too much in that kind of weather."

"But they've got to do something, Pete. They can't just camp out there—"

"They've got all winter," he said.

"You think Poncha Pass is snowed in—that we're cut off from town?"

"Bound to be, Judy. Malloy wouldn't try to play like this if it wasn't. Of course, there's always the road across toward Saltillo. But it's nearly fifty miles to Saltillo, and they know nobody from there would be riding this way this time of year."

"Somebody might hear the shooting and send help."

He shook his head. "Not likely. We're cut off from Aroya by a mountain range, and there ain't no ranches anyways close. And these mountains smother up sound."

"You make it sound pretty bad, Pete."

"It is bad," he said.

They crouched there in darkness in the kitchen. Judith didn't need Pete Holding's word for it to know that the situation was a desperate one. They were trapped here in this lonely ranch house, holed-in by a killer crew fighting for a princely sum. She knew now that the money – the forty thousand dollars in cash which had been the payment price for the Big Four—must be hidden somewhere here in the house. There was no other way to explain the action of the outlaws. And she knew that, while they might hold Malloy's crowd off for a while, in the end Pete Holding and she were bound to lose this fight. Pete had been without sleep for two nights now, and it couldn't go on forever.

A cat-and-mouse game, it became. The big yellow moon waxed and waned, and still the outlaws made no move. They seemed quite content to remain in the bunkhouse and await their opportunity.

Another day dawned, bright and clear and cold. And another night, with the thermometer dropping to twenty below and a big moon riding high in a frozen sky.

For Judith it had become a kind of nightmare—a confused and restless struggle holding no meaning; crouching at a window staring across the glare of a snow-packed yard until her eyes ached with the strain; shoving chunks of wood into the hungry maw of a red-hot stove; cooking; eating, sleeping, even; sleeping in little snatches that brought no rest because she slept always with the fear of what might happen.

No action. That, at the last, was the worst of all. Nothing to do—nothing to do but wait for that outlaw crew in the bunkhouse to make the moves.

And Hook Malloy made no moves. His men sent an occasional bullet crashing through the shattered windows; beyond that they hardly seemed to stir. Balked by clear days, by a full moon and sub-zero weather, they seemed content to wait. Perhaps they reasoned that there was no need for haste.

Pete Holding was a tower of strength. Sometimes he tried little jokes; sometimes he laughed at her,

and when he did, Judith knew that he was trying to give her courage. Sometimes she caught his gray eyes fixed on her, filled with a queer tenderness that sent her pulses racing.

She kept her chin up. She had stepped into this thing and she meant to see it through. She sat at the window in the kitchen, a rifle in her hand, while Pete Holding grabbed little snatches of sleep. She carried water, kept the fires going, cooked the meals. She knew that Holding had slept hardly at all, yet he seemed fresh enough. He was like a solid rock at her back.

She said, "Why don't they do something? Anything—anything would be better than this. Even a fight."

This was afternoon of the second day. The cowboy's face was graver, more worried than she had seen it before.

"Why should they, Judy? They figure they got all winter. Hook Malloy seems to be a pretty cagey crook who knows how to wait."

"But what's he waiting for?"

Holding shrugged. "A dark night. A snowstorm. Anything that'll give his crowd a chance to close in without too much risk. There's only four of them, you know."

That was it. It was a devilish game that the hook-nosed outlaw and his men were playing. Waiting—watching—sending an occasional bullet to keep the defenders uneasy—secure in the knowledge that no help would come, that their quarry could not escape.

"I wish we had horses," Judith whispered. "If we had horses we might ride for it."

Pete Holding glanced at her. "I've been thinking, Judy," he muttered. "If I got a horse would you be willing to try to ride for help? Tomorrow, early in the morning—"

She stared at him. "Where would you get a horse?"

"I'll get the horse," he said. "And I've figured a way to keep those gents from trailing after you. You'd be in the clear. The Pass is bound to be snowed in, but you could head across the desert toward Saltillo. It's a long ride but all open country, and you know the way. You'd be safe enough."

She considered briefly. Given the horse, she could make the ride through to Saltillo. It would be a long trip, and a hard one in this weather, but she felt no doubt that she could get through. But Saltillo was just a little crossroads hamlet; it wasn't likely she'd find the kind of help needed to fight this crowd of outlaws.

She shook her head. "It wouldn't be any use, Pete. I couldn't get any help in Saltillo."

"You could send word to Aroya."

"That would take two days. And you'd be left here alone. I won't do it, Pete."

Patiently he argued. "It's the best chance, Judy."

"There's no chance at all," she said. "I won't leave you here alone. And you couldn't get the horse, anyhow—you'd have to try to steal one from the barn, and that's too risky. They'd kill you, Pete."

He let it drop. Hunkered down on his heels he peered out through a slit in the blanket at the bunkhouse a hundred yards away. In the half darkness of the room Judith studied his profile—the straight line of his nose, the tight mouth, the chin that was like a chunk of granite—

Queer. This was the man she was fighting for possession of the Big Four, this grim-faced young rider crouching

there with a rifle in his hands!

But maybe there wouldn't be any fight between them, even if they succeeded in winning through. If Pete's theory was right, the missing money which had started the quarrel was hidden somewhere about this house. Their days had been too crowded for them to look for it yet. If they fought off Hook Malloy's crowd, there would be plenty of time to locate the money. If they didn't, they wouldn't need it.

She lifted herself to her feet wearily. "I'll cook something, and then you can sleep. I'll take first guard tonight, Pete."

That was the night Pete Holding made his try for the horse.

Judith had no warning in advance of his intent. He left her standing guard, but she had thought he meant to snatch an hour of sleep. Her first knowledge that he had other plans was when she saw a dark shape moving slowly across the moonlit waste of snow. Pete Holding it was, tunneling his way, crawling with infinite caution toward the barn.

She almost cried out at sight of him. Her heart leaped into her throat and stayed there as she watched that dark figure shove closer and closer to the sheds. Her fingernails were biting into the rifle stock as she knelt frozen at the window. It seemed impossible that Pete Holding could cross that open, moonlit space without being seen from the bunkhouse.

Somehow he made it. She breathed again as he disappeared in darkness beneath the shed. So far he was safe. Heart pounding wildly, she waited for the shout that would tell her he was discovered, for the shot that would bring him down.

Blood was pounding against her brain. Her eyes ached with the strain of watching. Nothing seemed to be happening. Over and over again she whispered a little, incoherent prayer:

"Dear God, send him back to me—send him back to me."

She realized she was in love with Pete Holding. If she hadn't known it before, she knew it now, quite surely. She had started out to fight him for possession of a ranch, but she was sure now there never could be a fight between them. And she knew that life would be meaningless if anything happened to Pete Holding.

He had been gone so long—so very long.

"Send him back to me—"

Then she saw him again. He was in saddle now—a stooped figure on a galloping horse that broke from the shelter of the sheds to race down upon the house. The horse came in great leaps, and they crossed that open space in seconds, but even so they stirred a whole volley of rifle fire from the bunkhouse. Judith grabbed up her rifle and triggered bullets back in a stream of fire—hasty shots fired with no aim.

The horse had swung from sight around the house. The bunkhouse was a hornet's nest now, with rifles barking from every window. Orange streaks of flame lanced the night. Lead smashed through the shattered windows, plunked into the walls. A bullet hit the top of the range and whined off in a singing ricochet. Crouching at the kitchen window, Judith slammed bullets back.

Pete Holding ran through the house to kneel down at her side. His voice rang exultantly. "Good work, kid! We got our horse!"

A tongue of flame was crawling

along the top of the wagon shed. She cried excitedly, "There's fire, Pete—the wagon shed's on fire!"

"I touched a match to it," Holding said. "Thought it might give them something to think about."

The flames soared higher, threw a brighter light across the yard as the flimsy structure blazed. The shed itself was some little distance from the bunkhouse, and Hook Malloy's men made no effort to fight the fire. Judith wondered what Holding had hoped to gain by firing the shed, since the flames would not reach the bunkhouse, and since the heat would offer nothing more than inconvenience to the outlaws.

Fire spread to the blacksmith shop and to the rounded mound of a haystack that burned like a great torch in the night.

"Didn't mean to burn the whole place down," Holding said. "Just wanted to wipe that shed out of the way so we could see the barn."

"You took an awful chance, Pete."

"I figured it was worth it."

"It wasn't," she said vehemently. "Not if you got that horse for me. Because I won't take it, Pete. I won't ride away and leave you here alone."

His voice was roughly solicitous. "Go and get some sleep, Judy, We'll talk it over in the morning."

She protested. In the end Pete Holding had his way. He argued that he had slept during the day—that he would sleep again tomorrow—that they would have to stand guard in regular shifts. Judith gave in at last.

"But I won't do any riding," she said. "This is my fight as much as yours, and I'm not quitting it."

"We'll talk that over in the morning," Pete Holding said.

CHAPTER SIX

Killer's Confession

HE HAD promised he would call her at four o'clock that morning, but daylight was streaming through her window when she heard his knock at the door. He gently brushed aside her protests.

"Nothing was happening," he said. "No reason for calling you."

She stirred up breakfast. Pete Holding sat at the blanketed window, a pipe between his teeth. There was a stubble of beard across his face, and his eyes were deeply sunken, and Judith noted the odd pallor of his face.

She put the breakfast on the table and stood guard while he ate. Eternal vigilance was the price they paid for each moment of their safety. He finished his meal and came over to sit down beside her. She noticed how his feet seemed to drag.

"You're tired, Pete."

"It hasn't been any picnic," he said gruffly. He loaded his pipe and lit it. "Stay there, Judy," he said. "I've got to talk to you."

There was something in his face that Judith couldn't understand. Strain and loss of sleep had made their marks, but this was something more than that. His eyes seemed to burn and his lips were drawn in a straight, tight line.

"What do you want to talk about, Pete?"

"Several things. None of them pleasant, Judy. The first is that I'm not the gent you think I am. I'm an outlaw."

She stared at him. "An outlaw?"

"An outlaw. A gent who happens to

wear a price tag on his head."

"But—Pete—I—thought—"

"I know." His voice was bitter. "You thought I was Lige Benson's nephew. Which proves you was sorta foolish, I guess. Because I just happened to be a gent who knew that forty thousand dollars was hid here in the house, and I figgered I could use the money. And I found the money—found it the morning of that day you showed up at the ranch. I was all ready to clear out when you came along."

He looked up at her for a moment, half defiantly. She didn't say anything. She sat there quietly, although the world seemed to be crumbling at her feet. This tall young cowboy sitting across from her wasn't Lige Benson's nephew—wasn't Lige Benson's heir. He was an outlaw—

She spoke slowly, out of a daze: "You say that—you found the forty thousand dollars?"

"Every dime of it," Pete Holding said. "It wasn't any trick. You see, I knew it was here, and I knew just about where to look."

It was all confused. Her brain was trying to handle this situation, but his words didn't seem to make much sense.

"Please," she whispered. "I guess perhaps I'm not quite awake yet. You say you're not Lige Benson's nephew—that you're an outlaw—and I'm trying to understand—"

He broke in curtly in a voice she had never heard before. "I'll make it plainer," he said brutally. "Hook Malloy and his crowd didn't rob Lige Benson and your uncle. Lord only knows how they found out those gents were riding empty-handed that day—that the money was still here in the house! But they didn't rob your uncle because me and Bill Bolger and a gent named Hardtack turned the trick!"

It wasn't true! Pete Holding was sitting there telling it to her, but none of it was true. It *couldn't* be true!

"You're joking, Pete," she whispered softly. "You're just—making fun of me."

But she could see in his stony face that he wasn't joking. "Making fun of you!" he said. "I wish I was making fun. You've done something to me, Judy—something no woman ever did before. But there's a tin box on the bed in my room. Go and get it—bring it here if you think this is a joke!"

She went. There was something in his eyes that forced her to make the trip. On the bed in his room was a square tin box, and she picked it up to carry it back and place it on the floor beside him. He opened the box and took out a small, square parcel wrapped in oilcloth.

"Open that," he said.

She fumbled with the string with trembling fingers. Still her mind was stunned. It wasn't true—it couldn't be true. Pete Holding an outlaw—a thief! The string broke under her fingers and the oilcloth fell away, and she saw a great pile of bills spread out before her eyes. Twenty-dollar bills.

"I'd already dug up the money when you showed the other day," Pete repeated in that odd, strained voice. "I was getting ready to pull out when you drove up. Then I got a funny idea—"

She stared at him. "Pete—you don't mean you were one of those men who held up Uncle Cal—one of the men who killed him?"

Under that level glance he shifted uneasily. He held up his left hand, the

hand with the little finger missing. Judith saw that the scar was freshly healed.

"Lige Benson shot that finger off," he said. "We had to kill them. They were two tough old gunnies, and they went for their guns. We never had no choice."

A killer! An outlaw and a killer! That was what he was—this gray-eyed, soft-spoken young man she had fought beside through three incredible days. A murderer! It was hard to credit this thing that he was telling her. He had killed her Uncle Cal.

Her mind went back to days spent on this ranch long ago, and she remembered that grim, square-shooting old man she had worshiped as a child—remembered his kindliness, his gentleness, his unswerving honesty. Three men had crouched in wait for him, and then tried to rob him. They had killed him—

Suddenly, her eyes were blazing as she looked across at Pete Holding—at this man who faced her calmly and tried to plead reason for an unnecessary murder.

"You had to kill them!" she cried. "You thought they carried money—and they fought back—and so you had to kill them!"

His face was harsh, his gray eyes ice. "Listen," he said. "Don't go into any song-and-dance! I never was any good—never wanted to be—never gave a damn about anything. I don't know what's gone wrong with me now—I don't know why I don't take this money and ride away! I'm giving you a chance. You better grab it before I change my mind!"

Forgotten now were those men beyond the house—the crowd of killers waiting in the bunkhouse. They stared into each other's eyes.

"Chance!" echoed Judith scornfully. "What chance? What do you mean anyway?"

"A chance that might not come again," Pete Holding said. "Take the money! Take the horse. Ride like hell! I'll cover you—hold that crowd back long enough for you to make a getaway!"

Even then—even with the sure knowledge that he was a killer, that he had killed an old man she had loved—Judith couldn't quite forget the memory of these last days.

"But you—you'd be alone. What will you do?"

"Don't let that worry you," he advised her curtly. "I can make my deal with Hook. Once he finds out who I am we'll get along all right. I'll tell him I couldn't find the money. I can take care of myself—but I can't take care of you."

He could take care of himself! Well, why not? He was a killer, and he would be right at home with that crowd in the bunkhouse.

From somewhere a rifle roared, glass from a shattered window splashed against a blanket, and the lead buried itself in the wall across the room. Pete Holding peered through the slashed blanket, his face a stony mask.

"I'll tell Hook I played along with you for the money, but that you didn't know anything about it. The horse is out in the woodshed. You better be getting ready to travel."

A killer! An outlaw! And yet he was doing this one thing for her. She stared at his grim, lined face, and tried to understand by what road he had reached this spot where he stood now. But it wasn't any use; it was something she could never hope to understand. He

killed her Uncle Cal–

"I'll be ready in a second," she said. "I'll ride. I'll ride–before you change your mind!"

These were almost the last words she was to exchange with Pete Holding before she rode away. She went to her room and dressed warmly. When she returned Pete Holding had taken the money from the square tin box. Leaving it in the oilcloth, he was putting an additional wrapping of newspaper around the parcel. He tied the newspaper tightly with twine.

"It'll carry better this way," he explained.

Judith nodded. She felt that if she tried to answer she might laugh or cry or shriek hysterically.

"Better try Poncha Pass first," Holding was saying. "It's almost sure to be snowed in, but there's an off chance you might get through. If you can't you'll have to head for Saltillo."

He walked with her to the woodshed to get the horse. The big house stood between woodshed and bunkhouse, so they were not in sight of Hook Malloy's outlaw crowd. Pete Holding put the package of money in the saddlebag. He tried the cinch for tightness, lifted his head.

"Good-by, then. And good luck, Judy."

"Good-by," she whispered.

From the saddle she looked down at his face, grim and drawn in the early-morning light. There were deep lines in his face now, lines that had not been there three days ago. His eyes were dulled by loss of sleep. For an instant she was almost sorry for him. But she thought of an old man she had loved–an old man brutally murdered–and the thought steeled her heart against Pete Holding.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Bloodstained Saddle

SHE rode away from the Big Four house. There was no trick at all to her departure. The log cabin was between her and the bunkhouse as she guided her horse across the snow-filled yard. She went over the creek bank in a smother of flying snow and let her horse pick his way along the slippery, frozen rocks. Now the creek bank hid her completely from sight of the men left behind.

Half a mile farther and she was forced to quit the creek, sending her mount angling up the bank onto the level plain. So doing, she came in sight of the ranch again, but she had no choice, for the creek bed dropped into a narrow gorge too steep for the horse to follow. They cleared the bank and she spurred the horse into a faster gait and pointed for Poncha Pass.

Years ago, when she had been a girl in pigtails, she had spent two happy summers here, and had ridden this range from end to end. It was all changed now; there was the glare of snow where she remembered the green of grass; but she found that she still recalled all the old familiar landmarks. As she turned the horse cross-country to cut the road she glanced back at the ranch that she was quitting. There was no sign of pursuit.

But when, an hour later, she came in sight of Poncha Pass, she saw that there was no chance to get through. Whipping winds had whirled great drifts of snow into that narrow defile, hopelessly blocking it.

It meant the longer ride and the trip

across the desert to Saltillo. That part of it she didn't mind. The sun was pushing higher in the sky, and the day was warm and clear. She had a good mount and a straight path before her.

She turned the horse and sent him down the road on a long jog that would bring her at last to the barren rim of the desert. She was in saddle, riding through an empty, snow-filled land; but some little part of her still remained back at the Big Four house. The horse needed no further attention once he was set on the road he was to follow, and Judith was free to give herself to her thoughts.

They weren't pleasant thoughts. Three days she had spent back in that big log house—nightmare days that yet held for her a poignant memory. She had laughed and joked and fought for her life at the side of a gray-eyed young cowboy who had told her he was Lige Benson's nephew—and had come very close to falling in love with him in the process.

She thought, bitterly, *You're a liar, Judith Winton. You did fall in love with him. You did—you did!*

There it was. That was the truth. She had fallen in love with Pete Holding—and Pete Holding was an outlaw and a killer. More than that, he was one of the men who had killed her uncle.

Well, it was something she couldn't help. Her heart had betrayed her; that was all there was to it. She couldn't do anything about it now. Neither, it seemed, could she put Pete Holding out of her mind. She thought of that last curt statement—

"I can take care of myself all right—but I can't take care of you."

That was what Pete Holding had said. And yet, last night, he had risked his life so that she might have a horse for her getaway. That much he had done. And he had turned back her uncle's money.

Finally she came to the rim of the bench and the road dropped off steeply to the level bowl of the desert, dazzling white now in the strong light of midday. Across that stretch of desert lay the little crossroads hamlet of Saltillo. A long log building that was combined store and saloon, a few ramshackle shacks, and nothing else. That was Saltillo as she remembered it.

She recalled that once she had ridden through the place with her Uncle Cal. The shifty-eyed proprietor of the store-saloon had been slouched in his doorway as they rode by, and she remembered that her uncle had not so much as nodded to the man. She wondered if it would be wise to ride into such a place with so much money in her saddlebag.

She pulled her horse up and looked around for a place where she might cache the money. Wind had whipped a rocky ledge clear of snow, and she saw a break in the ledge that looked like an excellent place for her purpose. She slid out of the saddle and took the square, newspaper-wrapped parcel of money from the saddlebag, and, careful to keep to wind-swept, bare rock so that she would leave no tracks, she stepped over to that broken place in the ledge.

Forty thousand dollars! She balanced the package of money in her hands. For this little bundle two men had died already. Forty thousand dollars—the very thought of so much money held an evil fascination.

She dropped down on the bare rock and untied the knots in the twine that Pete Holding had tied around the pack-

age. She unwrapped the oilcloth covering and bent down over the money. Crisp new twenty-dollars bills, still in the paper wrappings in which Lige Benson had received them from his bank. Forty thousand blood-stained dollars—

She shuddered, wrapped the bills again hastily in the oilcloth, tied the string. But her eyes caught and held for an instant on the headline in the newspaper. An old *Aroya Times*, it was—a months-old paper caught up at random by Pete Holding to wrap around the money. But that headline drew the girl's eyes as a magnet draws iron filings—that big black headline:

LIGE BENSON VISITOR IN AROYA

RUMORED IN MARKET FOR BIG FOUR

How strange it was that Pete Holding should have picked that particular newspaper in which to wrap up a bundle of money! Judith's eyes moved down the column.

When she had finished, she tore the clipping from the paper, folded it carefully, and put it in a pocket in her mackinaw. She wrapped the rest of the newspaper around the oilcloth, tied the string, shoved the package back into the hole in the broken rock. She piled loose rocks around it before she went back to her horse.

Then, Judith saw something which, somehow, she had missed before. In the brown of the saddle leather was a darker stain, a brownish stain that widened as it ran down along the saddle skirt. She scraped it with her finger and a thin film curled under her fingernail, and she knew the stain was blood. Suddenly, she remembered the odd pallor of Pete Holding's face that morning.

She spoke aloud, wonderingly: "He was wounded. That was why he wanted me to get away. Not because he was an outlaw—"

Far off, sharply distinct in the crisp air, she heard the roar of guns.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Death's Serenade

PETE HOLDING was making his last fight. He knew it. Pain from the wound in his side was pulsing in slow waves through his body. Struck during the night as he raced toward the house on the stolen horse, the slug had torn an ugly groove along his ribs. It wasn't too bad, as bullet wounds go; but he had lost more blood than he realized, and strength had gone with the blood.

Sprawled behind the blanketed window in the kitchen, he idly watched the bunkhouse. He knew the outlaws must have seen Judith as she came up out of the creek on horseback, and he knew they must understand that he was alone. Judith had been gone for hours, and now Pete Holding couldn't understand why Hook Malloy delayed his move. That scar-faced outlaw was plenty smart enough to take advantage of the fact that now the house had but a single defender.

Loss of the girl would make a decided difference. A situation bad enough before was completely hopeless now. But the sun swung higher in the sky and the day grew warm and clear, and still Malloy made no move. It puzzled Pete Holding. All Malloy had to do now was divide his forces and attack from two sides at once, and success would be certain.

The wounded man grinned at a

thought. There was a certain ironic humor in the knowledge that the outlaws would come out of it empty-handed. The money was gone with the girl—

For a moment then the man's mind slipped, thinking about the money, remembering how it happened that he had been able to produce it so patly for the girl. Last night, crawling toward the barn to try and steal a horse, he had curved around the wagon shed to crouch down in the darkness behind the bunkhouse. He had been playing then with a fantastic plan for capturing Malloy's whole crowd. He had abandoned the plan, figuring the odds too long; and he had turned and started to crawl toward the barn when a voice lifted somewhere in the bunkhouse.

"It'd be a hell of a joke," that voice had said, "if we couldn't find that dough after all this rumpus."

Another voice had made reply, and the man crouching in darkness outside had known it was the voice of Hook Malloy.

"Don't let that worry you," Hook Malloy said. "Get me in that house again and I'll produce the money. Old Moffatt kept his pile buried under a loose board in his bedroom. I got that part of it straight."

Hook had been dead right. That was how it happened that Pete Holding had been able to give the money to Judith. He'd had to lie considerably, but that didn't matter. Judy was safe now, and that was the thing that counted.

In Pete Holding's drawn face the thin lips curved in a little smile. He had fooled her—fooled her badly—

Then, far off to the right, where the corrals made rectangular patterns in the snow, he saw one dark shape and then another break from the poles to dive over the creek bank and disappear from view. He turned his rifle that way and threw a hasty shot, but the two were already gone from sight. He knew what was coming now. Those men would advance down the creek, and then the outlaws would attack from two sides at once, as they had tried to do on the night of their arrival. But, this time, they would succeed.

His big frame seemed drained of strength, but deliberately Holding made his preparations. He locked the kitchen door and then he slid the big cupboard against it. He piled chairs and a table against the front door so the outlaws would find no quick and easy means of entrance to the house. Knowing there could be no hope for him, he was determined to sell out as dearly as he could.

From the living-room window he would command a clear view of the creek. Feeling sure that the first attack would come from there, he lined two rifles and a shotgun by the window and sat down to wait. In the bunkhouse someone was blazing away with a rifle, and slugs were whistling through the house.

Holding fumbled in his pockets, found his pipe, and loaded it with tobacco. The effort spent in blocking the doors had started his side bleeding again, and he could feel the warm blood trickling down beneath his shirt.

The rest was waiting. He smoked a pipeful of tobacco and then shoved to his feet to make a careful round of the house. Patiently he studied the line of creek bank curving around the yard. He knelt at the kitchen window, peering through the slit in the blanket, watching the bunkhouse for some sign that would signal the beginning of the

attack. Oddly, he did not think of the death that was so very close at hand—thinking, instead, of a girl who had faced him with flashing eyes—

"I'll take the money," Judith had said. *"I'll take the money and go—before you change your mind."*

He grinned ruefully at the memory. He was still grinning when, from the bunkhouse, two rifles opened up with a blasting fusillade. Feeling sure that this burst of firing was a stratagem designed to draw his attention from the creek, the cowboy rose to his feet and quit the kitchen to take up a position at the living-room window.

He was right. Barely had he reached the window when the two men behind the creek bank burst from cover. They came up together, spaced a good fifty yards apart, and together they raced down on the house.

Pete Holding leaped erect, jerked the blanket from the window, lined sights on a running man, and pulled the trigger. A miss. He fired again, and this time he didn't miss. The running man threw his hands wide and pitched forward on his face like a swimmer diving into deep water. Snow splashed around him, covered him.

He whirled on the second man. He was too late. He triggered lead, but the running man was too close to the house, protected by the angle of the walls. Holding heard a crash as something smashed against the kitchen door. He heard glass shatter and knew that someone was coming through a window. There was a man behind him in the living-room.

It was a hopeless game. A blanket ripped from a window, and Holding spun around to face a man with a six-gun already blazing. They traded shots at six feet. Holding felt the solid jolt of a bullet smashing into him, and he saw the man in the window bend forward stiffly and lay there draped across the window sill. Two men were charging from the kitchen—

The room was full of smoke, full of the stinging smell of powder. Pete Holding was on hands and knees and didn't know how it had happened. There was a roaring in his brain, and the room was turning dark, and everything was blotting out. Instinctively his gun was tilted upward and he was still thumbing lead. He thought he saw a man go down. Then that black curtain closing down on him seemed to lift again for an instant, and he saw a face he knew. Hook Malloy's face—

Words broke through the roaring in his brain. "You poor damn fool! You can't shoot with an empty gun!"

That was it. That was what was wrong. His gun was still in his hand and he was going through the motions—but you couldn't shoot when your gun was empty.

For a moment then everything was plain to Pete Holding. The black fog was gone. One man lay face down on the floor, but Hook Malloy was still on his feet. Hook Malloy, with lips curled back in a snarl, with blood running down his face, was glaring down at him. Hook Malloy was standing on braced legs, with a gun held high in his hand.

"You knocked over three men today," Hook was saying. "Three pards of mine— Look at me, Holding. I want you to see what's coming."

Pete Holding knew what was coming. He could see the gun, the malignant face behind it. He wanted to tell Malloy that he had lost, that the money had slipped out of his hands. He knew there wouldn't be time for that.

"Look at me," Hook Malloy was saying. The black gun was leveling slowly.

There was a shot.

Malloy crashed to the floor.

Pete Holding thought maybe he was dreaming, for a girl was crawling through a broken window into that shambles of a room. And, unless it was a dream, the girl was Judith, and she had that little bulldog thirty-eight in her hand, and tears were streaming down her cheeks. She dropped to her knees beside him.

"Oh, Pete!" she was crying. "I killed him—I killed him! I had to kill him—"

Pete concluded that if this was a dream it was a very pleasant sort of dream, for she had both her arms around his neck and she was kissing him on the lips.

"I don't get it yet," Pete Holding said. "I still don't savvy how you happened to come back. Not that I'm kicking, you understand."

That was sometime later. That was after the cowboy had been bandaged and put to bed, and after the rescue party had arrived from town. A prospector holed up on Sawtooth range, forty-odd miles away, had sighted the glare of fire from the burning haystack the night before, and he had ridden in to Aroya with news that the Big Four was going up in smoke. A party led by the sheriff had broken through Poncha Pass to reach the ranch.

Judith was sitting beside Pete Holding's bed. She tried to put her hand across his mouth, but Holding persisted.

"You thought I'd killed your uncle, Judy. What brought you back?"

She showed him the clipping then, the piece she had torn from the newspaper in which the money had been wrapped:

LIGE BENSON VISITOR IN AROYA

RUMORED IN MARKET FOR BIG FOUR

Lige Benson, well known stockman of the San Luis section, was a visitor in town today. Accompanied by his nephew, Pete Holding, whose left hand is still in bandages as the result of an accident in which he lost his little finger . . .

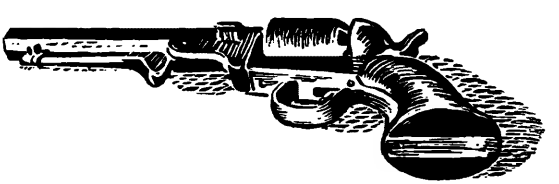
"I tore that from the newspaper you used to wrap the money," Judith said.

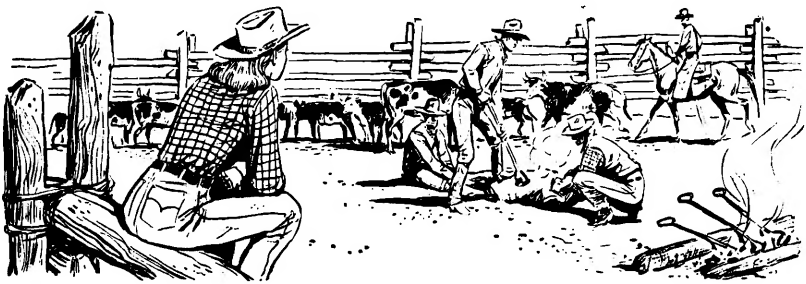
"That little finger was the giveaway."

She nodded. "You're an awfully good liar, Pete. I'll never know when to believe you, after this."

"Believe this, Judy," Pete Holding said. "I love you. I guess I've been in love with you ever since the first time I saw you."

And she must have believed him after all. For when, sometime afterward, the sheriff stopped in the doorway to Pete Holding's room, the lawman blushed. THE END





THE BRANDING PEN

RATING FOR YEARS as one of the two or three topmost writers of Western fiction, Ernest Haycox is represented in this issue of ALL WESTERN by an unusually dramatic short story, "Skirmish at Dry Fork." Among the skirmishers on one side is young Plains-cavalry recruit Bob McIntyre–but the "enemy" is not a band of whooping Cheyennes or fierce-fighting Sioux. "Battle" is joined when a celebration-bent group of payday troopers meet head-on with a bunch of Texas trail drovers in a frontier saloon. And the "incident" which set it off?–just a bit of gamecock rivalry between young Bob and a Texas man over which one is to dance with pretty Louisa! But from it flows not only a roughhouse brawl in the grand tradition but a clash of wills, a burst of flaming passions, and a revelation of human character which add up to typical Haycox Western fiction. Yes, it's a yarn to read-and-remember! And your editor deems it good tidings to announce to ALL WESTERN's readers that more of Ernest Haycox's fine stories will be reprinted in future issues of this magazine.

Author Haycox was born in Portland, Oregon, and–contrary to the fiddlefooted propensities of many Americans, including the heroes of some of his novels–still resides there. He saw overseas action in the First World War and selective-service-board duty in the Second. Among his most popular books have been *Man in the Saddle*, *Trail Town*, *Alder Gulch*, and *Long Storm*. He has contributed hundreds of short stories to magazines, many of them having appeared in *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

• Bill Gulick, author of the pioneer yarn, "Cascades Crossing," is a young up-and-coming author whose fiction has been published in a long list of adventure and Western magazines and, more recently, in *Argosy*, the *Post*, and *Country Gentleman*. Bill's first book, *Bend of the Snake*, was published a few months ago by Houghton Mifflin–and a good action novel it is. Oklahoma-born, Bill married a Tacoma girl when he drifted out to the Coast; since they both like to travel, they've been back and forth across the country several times and are currently enjoying a prolonged stay in Mexico. Naturally we're hoping that while they're there Bill will take time off from eating *tortillas* and *frijoles* and basking in the sun to write some stories–including

one or two for A-W.

● "The Princess Lassoed the Pirate," an agreeable blend of fact-and-fancy, came from the busy typewriter of Hal Preece. While Hal's fingers pound the keys, those of his great-granddad used to press triggers, said Great-Grandpap having been a cousin of Daniel Boone's who started blazing trails in the Kentucky hills and wound up blazing 'em in the Texas hills back in the days when the Lone Star State-to-be was still an independent nation. Hal, himself a native-born son of Texas now lives and works in Brooklyn—on the surface it might seem an inexplicable shift, but the logical result of several years of newspaper and magazine work, and Hal claims that Flatbush Town is next-best to the West for local color and flavor!

● Like its predecessors, this issue of ALL WESTERN demonstrates how good art work can add punch to a magazine. From front cover (Bob Stanley) to back (Phillip Vessels) there just doesn't seem to be a dull spot. John Murray and John Higgs (inside-front and inside-back covers respectively) and the black-and-white brigade—Higgs, Nick Firfires, Earl Sherwan, and Erv Schweig—all have turned out some fine attention-getters. So our hats are off to these fellows who ordinarily get little credit!

Your next issue of ALL WESTERN will be cramjammed with good fiction, including three crackling-action novelettes of the Old West: "The Tomahawk Hert," by L. P. Holmes, in which some salty trail drovers tangle with a bunch of justifiably proddy rangemen; "The Trailsman," another of Allan Vaughan Elston's superbly plotted yarns; and "Señor Renegado," by L. L. Foreman, which features a long-shot-gambling, hell-for-leather Texan, a pretty-and-in-trouble señorita, a likable Mexican rogue, and a rough, gruff *bandido* chief. There'll also be outstanding short stories by Ernest Haycox, T. T. Flynn, and Elsa Barker and another colorful fact feature by Hal Preece. Looks like good fun all 'round: a rousing-big two-bits' worth!

—THE EDITOR.

Six issues of ALL WESTERN for $1.50—subscribe now and make sure of getting your copy! The next six issues of ALL WESTERN will be full of exciting, colorful, romantic fiction of the great American West—novels, novelettes, and short stories, plus outstanding articles, pictures, and other features—all for only $1.50!

ALL WESTERN
Poughkeepsie, New York

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Apparently, Pete Holding was using his gun to crack a walnut.

Six-Gun Serenade, Chap. 2

Riff's finger started to squeeze the trigger.

The Road to Sandoval, Chap. 7